

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“When the Bad News Leads to Good News”

The third in an Advent series

Luke 3: 1-18

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John the Baptist is sort of a strange figure to be lurking about during the holiday season. It's a time of great fun and great beauty and all that... and John the Baptist with his odd dress and eccentric, in-your-face preaching... just doesn't seem to belong.

I'd be willing to bet (were preachers allowed) that you've never gotten a Christmas Card with a picture of John the Baptist on the front. Open it up... **“Merry Christmas... you brood of vipers.” “Repent, repent, repent... happy holidays to you and yours.” “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Warmest Wishes.”**

You've never read a John the Baptist card from Hallmark, I'm sure.

The church, on the other hand, wants us to read about John, this bizarre Baptizer with his obnoxious sermons. I suppose that's because the church isn't just interested in making us feel good. The church wants us to be good.

There is great fun and great beauty in this season... plenty of joy but also plenty of John.

There is salvation, but what does it take to know it?

There is good news... but what does it take to hear it and receive it?

Do we have to hear bad news first? John would say yes. Something has to get us ready. **“Who told you to flee from this coming wrath? Don't run away from this...”**

In the redemptive story, there is preparation. It takes preparation apparently for the salvation story to become our story.

John was a forerunner to salvation. His task wasn't to transform or to redeem but to get folks ready for the transformation and redemption that God was sending. He was preparing a way... which implies that a way needs preparing.

He went out into the desert and belted out a message.

He called a spade a spade
and a sinner a sinner

And did it with the volume cranked way up. Odd thing was... folks were flocking out to the desert to hear him.

Would you? If you got word that there was a John the Baptist type guy on the shores of Lake Waco preaching bad news, would you go out to hear him?

I wouldn't. That's the last place I'd want to be or feel the need to be. Most of us would pass.

And lots of folks didn't go hear John back then. Plenty dismissed him. Notice in Luke's version of the story, the religious insiders aren't out there at the wilderness revival. They're back in Jerusalem at the temple where things are more reasonable and the sermons are more palatable.

More of a Hallmark kind of faith perhaps?

It's nice... comfortable... known.

Someone says a prayer,
makes a sacrifice,

and we all go home feeling better.

John's services weren't like that and lots of folks didn't go... But some did. They flocked out there. They may not have liked his message but they knew they needed to hear it.

It wasn't so much a "get right" message as it was a "get real" message. "**You need to be real, be honest... repent**" was the word John used. "**Metanoia, everyone and metanoia now.**" **Turn. Reorient yourself to what is... be real.**"

That was the point of the sermon. No poem or tear jerking story... just an invitation to come clean.

That may be what drew the folks out there.

An opportunity to quit the game-playing.

To let go of the illusions.

Quit holding up the appearance.

Not an easy thing to do... and that's probably why John had to look so bizarre and sound so loud. Something has to jolt us usually for us to see what's real. There are too many layers of deception.

We are like a bunch of gnarled up snakes in a way... a brood of vipers. I can't tell where you start and I stop. I'm not even sure what's me and what's you... and all of us knotted up together can be pretty poisonous.

The way does need preparing doesn't it? Something has to untangle the mess... Someone has to cut through all the layers which is no easy task.

We are so good at fooling ourselves... so good at protecting the ego. Our masks are so well worn we don't even know we have them on. We tend to deny and avoid...

But something deep down wants what's real.

Maybe we all want to come clean.

We want to be found out and known at our core.

We waste such energy being unreal.

John invites us to a different way... repent, turn around, get real with yourself or there's no way to experience the coming salvation. And being real, repenting, isn't just about some internal awareness... it's not about conjuring up some guilt.

"**Bear fruit,**" John pounds home, "**In keeping with your repentance.**" In other words, we've got to be congruent. We've got to get integrated somehow... Being real isn't just about honest talk but an honest life.

Well... he has their attention. Would he have your attention yet? I mean if you had wandered out to Lake Waco out of curiosity or maybe some unconscious hunger for something more... would he have your attention.

He has their attention. **“What should we do?”** They understand this isn’t about believing the correct doctrinal laundry list in their heads. Anyone can do that. **“What should we do?”**

I’m struck at how simple John’s instructions are. It’s very simple and it’s very particular. It’s not, **“Y’all go love everybody.”** **“Go be nice.”** John fashions answers which deal with a particular temptations.

To the wealthy in the crowd. **“If you have an extra coat or an extra meal, find someone who needs that and give it to them.”**

A word to the tax collectors. **“Quit over taxing.”**

To the soldiers, **“Quit extorting money and intimidating people.”**

It’s specific.

In this sermon, it’s all about social justice really. In other sermons he went after King Herod and his opportunistic ways with the Romans and his illicit relationship.

I wonder what he’d say to us. If we were out on the banks of Lake Waco and he looked across the congregation that we are. If we decided to be real and if we wanted to be congruent... and if we shouted back at John, **“What should we do then?”** What kinds of things would John say to us?

They would be simple and they would be specific, don’t you think.

They might be similar to what those folks heard by the Jordan that day. **“Well, you in the middle class, whose closets are stuffed, take at least half of that and take it to someone who doesn’t have anything... and don’t just take the worn out stuff.”**

He might say, **“If you’ve never missed a meal, which is every last one of you, you need to have one specific way that you are helping with hunger in this community or in the world.”**

Or... **“Those of you with education find someone to tutor.”**

Or **“Those of you with time give it to a single mom who has none.”**

Or **“Those of you born with opportunity provide it for one other.”**

“What should we do?”

To the tax collectors, those in business and in commerce... he might say, **“Be congruent with your faith.”** **“Don’t make the bottom line about money... it ought to be different for a person of faith.”** **“And the people who work for you should be glad they do.”**

“What should we do?” The soldiers asked too.

To those in powerful positions... bosses... parents... leaders... teachers... physicians... Those with charisma... with a quick mind or wit. **“Be very careful with your position. Don’t use your position for your own gain. Watch out for those who are vulnerable to who you are.”**

And to those of us who hadn’t been offended or turned off yet, he’d say. **“Refuse to judge another person.”** **“Quit comparing yourself to others.”** **“Never, ever, gossip.”**

He'd say, **"Do not condemn anyone... including yourself."**

He'd say, **"Drive negative and despairing thoughts from your mind."**

He'd say, **"Be kind to someone who drives you crazy and love someone who doesn't like you."**

It would all be about being real... being congruent. It begins with an honest look and a turning, a reorienting and then we do out there what is taking place in here.

I wonder how you feel about this? Lots of us are interested in spiritual transformation... not too many of us are willing to change in order to be ready for it. Remember... this is about preparation. There is a work we do. The Early Church Father's called it "asthesis." It's what we do to prepare the way of the Lord. There's plenty to do... but it's just preparation.

Being a benevolent soul or a kind heart is good... Doing justice is right. But it isn't transforming. That's the work of God. You don't transform yourself, transformation happens by God's grace, God's coming into our lives. The work isn't the end.

The people wondered if this was it... if John was the Messiah. **"Nope,"** John said, **"I can only baptize you with this water here... but there's another who can baptize you with wind and fire."**

And it's that great image of a farmer throwing the wheat into the air... and the good grain falls to the ground and the worthless dust is blown up against the side of the barn where it's just done away with... consumed.

It's only a frightening image if you assume you're either wheat or chaff. If you're both, like I know I am, it's the most hopeful thing I can imagine... That Christ is coming into my life with a winnowing fork and will transform me and purify me... will do away with what needs to be done away with. That which is not longer needed.

"Who told you to flee from this fire?" No need... just be opening and real... get ready for it's purifying work in your heart. The One who is headed towards you, winnowing fork in hand, loves you more than you can begin to know.

Luke ends the section by saying, **"And with lots of other words, John preached the good news to them."** They just had to hear the bad news first in order to know how good it was.