

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

## “On Our Way to the Manger”

Luke 3: 2-20

December 17, 2006

I was really tempted this week to stray from the Lectionary. Crusty ole’ John’s yelling about fire and I’m thinking, **“You know, it’s the 17<sup>th</sup>, for goodness sakes, why not just skip past John and head onto Bethlehem... Or at least to Mother Mary singing, “Let it Be” or the “Magnificat.”**

I thought about it...but couldn’t do it. And it’s not because I’m a lectionary legalist. It’s because, as chronologically backwards as it is, it’s theologically right to make a trip into the desert to hear John on our way to the manger.

We want to get there and we should want to get there.

The incarnation of God...

Into the world and into our hearts...

We want to be at the manger where God the great Mystery, finally seems so near and so intimate. That’s where we want to be, with Mary and Joseph, snuggled up next to God wrapped in swaddling.

But... you can’t get to that sort of intimacy with God, without following a certain path, and there’s a stop we have to make and a message we have to hear out there in the wilderness.

That’s where John was preaching. He didn’t set up a revival tent outside the temple. He was out there in the wilderness around the Jordan. Not what we in the business would refer to as a “seeker-friendly” situation. And he’s not what we might call a “seeker-friendly” preacher.

You heard it, **“He said to the crowds... ‘You brood of vipers...’**

The key here is to note that the crowds going out to see him weren’t paying his salary. He had one camel hair suit and survived by eating bugs.

So, I’d say to all our young seminarians, **“If you’re willing to eat bugs and have one deerskin outfit... you can pretty much get away with saying anything. If you want to keep your major medical and IRA, you better edit out the brood of vipers line from your manuscript. Or at least soften it... You brood of really irritable lizards, that’s what you are... Better yet, say “we” instead of “you.” If you want to keep your paycheck anyway.**

What’s amazing is that folks seem to be flocking out to see John. He seemed to have some charisma and he was certainly more interesting than what was going on down at the temple.

He came preaching repentance...

that message that means we’ve got to turn...

... got to reorient ourselves.

We’re centered in the wrong things... we’ve got to repent.

And that’s why we’ve got to hear this on the way to the manger. There’s no journey that does not begin with the belief that a journey needs to be made.

There has to be a willingness to see. There has to be some recognition of what is and what's true about who we are and where we are... and that, **“brood of vipers”** that we are... or at least, **“really mean grasshoppers”** that we are... we are oriented to the wrong thing.

That's why John is yelling “repent” and that's why he's borrowing one of Isaiah's old sermons about how the way of the Lord needs to be prepared.

The image is of some dignitary coming to town but the road outside of town is a mess.

Potholes everywhere...

Needless detours...

Litter and debris...

John's word is, **“let's make it easier for the Lord to get to us.”** Clear a straight path... smooth out the rough places... pick up all those lotto tickets and Whataburger wrappers thoughtless people pitched out the window.

**“Something wonderful is on the way and there's too much in the way blocking and distracting... Repent.”**

So... that's the deal and why we have to stop in the desert first on our way to the manger. Because if we want to draw close to God or better yet, be ready as God draws close to us, we have to repent... we have to turn and reorient ourselves.

The folks out in the wilderness were doing just that... And do notice how humble and hungry they were. **“What should we do?”** In other words, this wasn't just a walk the aisle and take the pastor by the hand and then go back to business as usual kind of thing. **“Tell me what to do.”**

You ever said that to anybody? I mean, at least not when your computer is on the blink or perhaps your teenager was... on the blink. It's something we only say from a position of humility... when we know we need some help.

And we in the protestant, modern, west... rarely get there. Unless maybe we make it into some 12-step program and learn to say **“I'm helpless.”**

**“Please, tell us what to do.”** How hungry are you to know God in an intimate way? Hungry enough to say, **“Tell me what to do.”** ... Hungry enough to do it?

Because there is a specificity to who we are... particularity. And so often in our spirituality we get sort of stuck in the generic and the general. **“Just turn your life over to Jesus... Make Jesus Lord of your life... I surrender ... all.”** Which, of course, often means **I surrender nothing.** We feel God move in our lives, we hear God speak, and think our thinking about that is the point.

No... we actually have to do some things... not just nod to them or know about them.

John gets very specific with them. **“If you have two shirts, give one away...”** Of course, for us he might say, **“If you have 63 shirts, give 62 of them away... or at least 31 of them.”**

It was specific... and ethical... It was moral. **“Anyone who has food ought to be sharing it with those who don't.”** And he might say to us, **“If you have enough money to eat dinner out... then the next day, send a check for that amount to the Gospel Café.”**

**“How ‘bout us?”** The tax collectors called out from the back row. **“Quit cheating everyone.”** ... **“Don’t take advantage of your position... Your position in life as a middle class American gives you so many opportunities. Make sure the opportunities you are acting on are just,”** is what John might preach.

**“And us?”** A Roman soldier said, pointing to his friends with his sword. **“You need to quit intimidating people and taking advantage of your power.”** **“Whenever... wherever you are in the one-up position... with a child, with an employee, with someone waiting on you... watch out how you are using your power.”** ... Maybe John would say it that way to us.

It’s impossible to miss that John’s instinctual answers are all about justice and caring for those who can’t care for themselves. Don’t miss that, especially if you’ve gotten humble enough to say, **“What about me?”**

Because if you’re serious about repenting and preparing a way for God it’s going to involve how you relate to those who are hurting... and it’s going to involve all you have and what you’re doing with it. ... What you are attached to and what you’re letting go of. We’re going to have to begin by saying no to some things of this world.

Don’t skate on past this too fast.

Luke didn’t.

The Bible doesn’t.

Our lives may be littered with injustice and it’s in the way of our intimacy with God... not to mention that it’s messing up the world.

But... John’s preaching wasn’t just about that... He did speak to what I would call “boardroom” issues. But he apparently, dealt with the “bedroom” as well. He meddled and it got him in trouble. He “went to preachin’” about Herod’s personal life... his personal morality.

So... be ready. When you say to John... or to God... or to some spiritual guide... **“What must I do?”** It won’t just be about how many shirts you have in your closet or help the poor... or whether or not you cheat on your taxes... It’ll also be about your personal life. It just will.

What is happening behind closed doors...

In your relationships... with your body...

In your mind and heart.

It seems to be the place we have to start... spiritually. We can’t maintain intimacy with God and be in a moral mess, publicly or privately. John’s message is sort of Relationship to God, 101, and lecture number one is you’ve got to make a straight path. There are things we must do...

And some of you are thinking, **“Is he saying, I can work my way into something... is that what he’s saying?”** Nope.

But I am saying that God is trying to come to us and the way is crooked. Grace is pouring from God’s heart... through the universe and towards us and it’s slamming into the stumbling blocks, which are in our lives.

And when you get hungry enough for grace and transformation....

Thirsty for real righteousness... wholeness.

When salvation must be real and not just a doctrine...

You're going to pray finally... **“What must I do?”**

And there's so much to do... And the answer which comes back from scripture, from the Spirit, from someone... to you may be different than it is for me.

*“What must I do?” “Stop lying to yourself.”*

*“What must I do?” “Quit spending all your money on yourself.”*

*“What must I do?” “You're way to busy... obey the Sabbath.”*

*“What must I do?” Stop speaking ill of your enemies.”*

*“What must I do?” “Make things right with those you've hurt.”*

*“What must I do?” Fight against the control food has on you... or the control approval has over you... or the obsession you have with clothes or cars .”*

*“What must I do?” You... oh, you need to learn to have fun... You??? You need to learn to be silent... You? to speak up.*

There is no generic way forward. Making Jesus Lord of your life begins with making Jesus Lord over your wallet... and your words... and your body... and your calendar. And if we're longing for intimacy with this God who has come among us... we must say, **“What must I do...”** And when the answer comes, we must do it.

Because you know what happened... after folks walked away from the Jordan. On the way home, they were all talking about how wonderful John was and how convicted they felt. But by the time they made it back to Jerusalem...

Not that many of them actually went to their closets and pulled out the extra shirts. A few did but got stuck deciding which one to get rid of and delayed the choice and then never chose.

Some of them actually gathered some groceries... once... Fewer did it twice... Fewer, three times... And so helping the poor became a holiday treat for themselves, not a transformative discipline and an act of compassion.

And the tax collectors???? A couple of them changed the lifestyle to which they were accustomed and actually stopped cheating as their practice. Most of the soldiers were well intended when they walked away from John's sermon... but living it out in the culture and context they were in was so hard. Certain things just seem to come with being a soldier. It's hard being in the world. It's so toxic to the soul... isn't it?

The grace of God has flooded the universe through Bethlehem's manger. The destination is your heart... the goal is your transformation and a world made right. But there's so much in the way. Listen to John, will you?

**“Prepare the way of the Lord. Clear a straight path. And all people will see the salvation of the Lord.”** Amen.

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