

“He Preached Good News”

Luke 3:7-8

I'm going to read from the beginning of chapter 3 to set up the context for what we'll be talking about later.

¹*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (ESV)*

I don't know how this is going to go right now. I didn't get to warm up at the first service with this sermon [disrupted due to a false fire alarm]. But I think because I didn't have anything to do I drank about four times as much coffee as I would otherwise do, so I don't know if that's going to make me talk faster or stutter more, but who'd notice.

Let me ask you this question. Did you ever feel guilty for something you didn't do? If you're human, my guess is you have because there are certain individuals who have the ability to make that happen. I think I'm one of them. I think I learned that from the guy who trained me well, Sergeant Allen. When I was in the Army (I'm sure it's the same with the Navy or the Air Force and Marines), there are times when one person in a platoon will do something wrong and the platoon Sergeant will gather the whole platoon and he'll chew out the one person without using the person's name, and every person in the platoon feels guilty. You know the kind of feeling I'm talking about? Or, in church when the pastor's preaching and he begins to talk about giving and even though you give, you still feel guilty. Or he talks about pornography or things like that and though you're not in trouble there, you begin to feel guilty. The same thing happens with our families as well. I have three daughters and I think I can make them all cry by talking about the sins of the one. I'm good at barging into the room and saying, "All right. Who's in charge of the dog? She left some big number out in the living room. Who's in charge?" Everyone feels bad.

When you read about John the Baptist it's interesting because the Gospel of Luke is different than the Gospel of Matthew. It's the same account and probably for different reasons, when Luke records for us John's address, John addresses the crowds and everyone in the crowd had to be squirming. We know they were because it says later they were.

We're going to look at three things this morning as we consider John the Baptist's ministry beginning. The first thing we're going to look at is "bad news for good people." The second point is "good news for bad people." And the third point is going to be "great news for all people."

So, what's the bad news for good people? You have put yourself in the scene here. John the Baptist has gone out into the wilderness by the Jordan and he's preaching a baptism of forgiveness of sins. And just to be clear, John did not claim nor did anyone think theologically that John's baptism accomplished the forgiveness of sins. Maybe a better way to translate it, and although it wouldn't sound as nice, but John went into the wilderness practicing a baptism with an eye toward forgiveness of sins. In other words, John's role was completely preparatory, so when you went to John to be baptized what you're doing is saying, "I realize I have a problem here." It wasn't accomplishing forgiveness. It wasn't doing anything except basically giving you the opportunity to say, "I need help." So, John goes out and preaches to the crowd.

⁷*He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"*

That's pretty harsh, wouldn't you say? The first thing John does is call the crowd the offspring of poisonous snakes. Now, that's important because if you look all the way back to the Book of Genesis, remember what happened when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden? Basically there were going to be two groups of people from that point on. There would be the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. If you read through the Bible, those two seeds sort of track side by side through the whole Bible. You have Cain and Able, Jacob and Esau. You can see them very vividly. John says to the whole crowd, "You brood of vipers." In other words, "You're not children of God, you're children of Satan." He yells that to the whole crowd.

When you're in a crowd like that and someone makes an accusation you tend to respond one of two ways. You feel guilty or you say, "You know, he can't be talking to me. I know I didn't do anything wrong. I know I'm a good person. I'm basically a decent guy. And besides that, I'm an Israelite. I'm one of God's chosen people." John yells out, "You brood of vipers," and everyone looks around to see who he must be talking about. "It certainly couldn't be me." Yet, John anticipates them beautifully. Notice what John says to them as they're standing around going, "I wonder who he's talking about." He says in verse 8,

⁸ *Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.* ⁹ *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

So, John says, "Who warned you from the wrath that is to come?" So the wrath is to come. And John almost seems angry, doesn't he? "Who warned you?" He's almost upset that they were warned. Yet he says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, "You're coming out here and you say that you want to have forgiveness of sins. You say you want to pursue God. Just bear fruit in keeping with that and then we'll know how serious you are about it." Then he anticipate that people are thinking, "Well, he can't be talking about me," so he says, "Don't even think that if you're a child of Abraham that you're okay. In fact, you're not. You children of Abraham are also part of this brood of vipers. It's not your race or ethnicity that makes you right with God, so you are no more a seed of the woman than the Gentiles. You brood of vipers." John is making a pretty bold statement to say to Israel that they are the seed of the serpent; they're seeds of Satan not seeds of God. In fact he says, "If God wanted to, he could turn these stones into children of Abraham. He could make these inanimate objects into animate objects that would in fact praise Him. So don't rely on that."

The question you have to ask yourself is, "What is it that you rely on for a right relationship with God?" Is it the fact that you've been in church your whole life? A lot of people do that. Some of you have been in church your whole life, skating along this whole time and thinking, "I go to church, I'm good to go. What's the big deal?" John says, "It's not going to church that makes you right with God." Some people think, "I do the right thing all the time." Is that what makes you right with God? John says, "No. It's not that that makes you right with God." What is it that makes you right with God? John doesn't tell us yet.

The problem with good and self-righteous people is just this. As I thought about it this week, I thought about sheep wranglers that we saw in Utah. This past summer we went to Bryce Canyon, Utah, and we stayed at this a campground. And across the street from the campground (I think it was called Ruby's) there was a small rodeo every single night. Judy and I talked about how our girls had never seen a real rodeo. We thought, "Let's go to this rodeo." The rodeo, to be honest with you, was pretty lame with the exception of the sheep wranglers. The sheep wranglers were all under four or five years old. It was funny before they even began because they made the announcement, "If your four year old wants to try a bucking sheep and they ride a bucking sheep out in front of everybody, we will reimburse the five bucks that you paid for your child to come into the rodeo." So you have parents going, "Come on, Johnny. You're going down there and ride a sheep." Kids were crying, "I don't want to ride a sheep. Dad, I don't want to ride." "That's five bucks. That isn't something to sneeze at." They go down and make these kids ride the sheep. Basically it was bucking broncos but with huge sheep. They would put the little kids in something like catcher's gear with a helmet. They'd put the kid on the sheep and someone would hold the kid. Then they would hit the buzzer and the door would swing open and any number of things happened. Some kids, as soon as the doors swung open, just fell right off and the sheep didn't move. For other kids, the sheep would take a couple of steps and as soon as the sheep started you could see the kid tipping over. So they might make it four or five steps. One little girl made it about forty meters. She made it the whole way, but she rode sideways the whole way. What all the sheep wranglers had in common is that no matter how good they were or bad they were, no matter how able they were to hang on, they eventually failed—every one of them. Some of the kids fell off as soon as you opened the door. Some of the kids made it twenty feet, thirty feet, forty feet, but eventually they all fell off. That's what those of us who are self-righteous need to remember. If you're self-righteous you're like a sheep wrangler. Some of you are really good at it. Some of you are really good at hanging on, but you know the problem is whether you're good at being self-righteous or not very good at being self-righteous, eventually everyone fails. If you are going to fail ultimately, where does that leave your righteousness? What good is it for you? It really can't help you. That's bad news for those of us who struggle with being self-righteous.

There's good news, of course, if you realize that you don't have what it takes. "You can put me on the sheep all day long but as soon as you open the door I'm going to fall off." Or, "I'm going to try and ride this sheep, but I'm always going to fall off. Every time I try to be good, every time I try to do the right thing it seems like I constantly fall off." It sort of reminds me of Romans chapter 7. "Every time I try to do good, evil's right there with me. I'm constantly messing things up." If that's who you are I have good news for you. The Gospel is for you.

I saw something in the text this week that I'd never seen before. There are only so many texts that have to do with Christmas, and I use the Common Lectionary, so every three years or so you end up preaching the same texts of scripture. I saw something this week that I'd never seen before even though I've probably preached this three or four times. Notice the good news for bad people. Let me read verse ten through fourteen.

¹⁰ *And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"* ¹¹ *And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."* ¹² *Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"* ¹³ *And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."* ¹⁴ *Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (ESV)*

John says, “The axe is right now at the root of the tree.” Frankly he is getting sort of “fire and brimstone” on them. “The axe is at the root of the tree. You better move now.” The crowd says, “What do you want us to do? If we’re going to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, what does it look like?” What was interesting to me is what he didn’t tell them and what he did tell them. He could have told them any number of things. He could have said, “Just leave here and be good.” He could have said, “Obey the Old Testament. Obey the Ten Commandments. That’s what it will look like. If you really want to know what the fruit of repentance looks like, obey the law.” “Vote for the right political party.” He could have told them anything. But what was interesting and what I had never seen before, when he says, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance,” and they say, “What should we do?” He says, “Be generous.” It’s pretty amazing if you think about it. It’s plain.

¹¹ . . . “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” (ESV)

In other words, the more you understand the Gospel, apparently, the more generous you become. The question you have to ask yourself is, “Are you a generous person?” People ask, “Pastor, what does it look like to live out the Gospel?” I preach on giving all the time, but John says it here. What does it mean to live out the Gospel, what does it mean to repent? It means to be generous. I went to reformed seminary and they send out a quarterly magazine. In the providence of God there was an article in it this week by a sociologist who just wrote a book about Christian giving. By the way, I didn’t plan on preaching on giving. This is an Advent sermon, but it’s right there. This sociologist wrote this article about Christian giving. He said a number of things but what was most shocking was in thousands and thousands of interviews with people who call themselves Evangelical Christians (these are people who are conservative Presbyterian types, not just general people). Twenty percent give absolutely nothing to anybody. I mean, thinking about tithing or something like that is not even on the radar. They give zero to anybody. If you’re part of that twenty percent, I’d encourage you to think through it – do you really understand what the Gospel is – what Jesus calls you to do? It was amazing to me that the first thing John says is, “Be generous.” So it makes sense that the very first people who are going to pipe in and say, “Well, what about us?” are going to be the greediest people in the crowd. Who are the most loathsome, Ebenezer Scrooge types in the crowd? It was tax collectors. Tax collectors were so odious in the sight of the people that they were not even allowed to go to church. They would have been excommunicated. There were two kinds of taxes: property taxes (for lack of a better term) and poll taxes and tolls and all these kinds of things. The tolls were basically farmed out. People would bid on them. So, if Rome said for an area, “You need to give us ten percent. Now, if you can get away with collecting eleven percent, twelve percent, thirteen percent, fourteen percent, that’s up to you. But as long as we get our ten percent that you promised us, then we’re good to go. So the tax collectors would do that and they would shake down all of their buddies and the inhabitants, and the people hated them. The tax collectors said, “What should we do?” It was interesting again – did you notice what he didn’t say to them? He didn’t say, “Stop being a tax collector.” If I didn’t know the story and someone asked, “What do you think He would say?” I would have guessed that. He’d say, “Go find some better line of work.” Did you notice what He said to them? He says in verse thirteen,

¹³ . . . *Collect no more than you are authorized to do.*” (ESV)

In other words, the fruit of repentance for tax collectors was just, “Do your job.” Repentance is much simpler, by the way, than we tend to make it out. He tells tax collectors, the most odious people with the most hated job, “Just do your job and do it well.” There’s something to be said in there for those of you who wonder, “What does it mean to be a Christian in the workplace? Does it mean that I’m to hand out holy Joe tracts to people or leave tracts in the bathroom? Do I corner people at lunch and say, “If you died tonight what would happen to you?” The primary way for you to be a Christian in the workplace, if in fact you are a Christian, is just to do your job and to do it well. That’s what God has called you to do. If he’s called you to be a doctor, nurse, lawyer, plumber, whatever he’s called you to do, do it with all of your heart. In my own experience, those are the kinds of things that make people actually want to know what it is about you. If you’re a Christian, just do your job.

Then, of course, the other people who are odious and have problems with money came and asked, “What about us?” That was the soldiers. Notice what he says to them.

¹⁴ *Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”* (ESV)

He didn’t say, “Stop being soldiers.” By the way, soldiers back then as today have to oftentimes break things and kill people. John didn’t say, “Stop doing those things.” He said, “Stop shaking down people for money.” So he’s gone from the crowd, “Be generous” to the soldiers, “Quit extorting people,” to all of them, “Do your job well.” It’s common sense. If that’s what repentance looks like, John, is that what it means to be saved? If I just do the right thing then I’m good to go, right? No. That’s not enough. John is not saying, “Do this in order to be saved.” They’re saying, “If I’m saved, if I’m repenting what does it look like?” John says, “Well, it looks like this.” But they haven’t asked the real question, “How do I get there?” So

they begin to ask the question, “I wonder if John’s the one? I wonder if he’s the Messiah? Is he the one who’s actually going to enable us to do this?” That’s the great news for all people. He says in verse 15,

¹⁵ *As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,* ¹⁶ *John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* ¹⁷ *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* (ESV)

You see, the good news for bad people is this, God pursues you and you actually are able to participate in the game, if you will. The people that are mentioned here, tax collectors and soldiers, were the last people that anyone would have thought had a chance in the kingdom of God, yet they’re the ones who asked, they’re the ones whom John answers. What’s the great news for all people? They begin to ask John, “Are you the one?” And John says, “No. I baptize you with water but one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. My baptism is external. His baptism is going to be internal. My baptism can only wash you. His baptism purifies. That’s what fire does. In other words, everything that my baptism is taking you to and everything that my baptism is pointing you to, His baptism will actually accomplish. I’m telling you to repent for the forgiveness of sins and be baptized for repentance for forgiveness of sins, and what He’s going to do is baptize you and accomplish the forgiveness of sins. The way He’s going to accomplish the forgiveness of sins is with the purifying fire of judgment. He will accomplish it.” It’s interesting what Luke says next, because it made me laugh when I was reading it this week. He says, “Here’s what John says,” then he interprets it. I want you to look at verse seventeen again.

¹⁷ *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* and ¹⁸ *So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.* (ESV)

Does that strike you as odd? He says that, “His winnowing fork is coming and he will separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff he will throw into unquenchable fire. And with these and many other exhortations he preached the good news to people.” Praise the Lord. Have a good day. It just sounds backwards, doesn’t it? It is unless you understand the Gospel. If you understand the Gospel, everything that John has said here is great news because the Messiah who is coming will bring fire and unquenchable judgment. And not only will He bring it, here’s the good news. He will bear it. He doesn’t just come in judgment, He comes to bear judgment. And at the cross, what Jesus does is take your sin and my sin and crucified it with Him and killed it. That’s what makes self-righteousness so goofy. That’s what makes legalism so futile, because if the gospel is true, Jesus has taken all of your sins and has died with them and is risen from the dead and they no longer are held against you. If they’re no longer held against you and your performance does not earn you righteousness with God, why do you spend so much time worrying about it? The great news of this passage is actually the bad news of this passage.

I’ll never forget December 15, 2000, seeing the front of a newspaper. The image is emblazoned on my mind. You can’t find on the Internet what I’m going to describe to you because I’m sure it has been scrubbed from the Internet. It was a picture of then Vice-President Al Gore with his hands in the air with completely sweaty armpits in the middle of a party with Jon Bon Jovi and Tom Petty, rock-and-roll stars from my generation. The caption underneath, in the New York Daily News, said, “Al Gore – Party Animal.” What is it that can take one of the stiffest human beings who has ever lived – that has nothing to do with his politics, it’s the way he comes across – and make him party? It was 2000, but he was partying like it was 1999 with his hands in the air like he just didn’t care. What is it that would bring someone like Al Gore to a place where he didn’t care what anyone thought, didn’t care where the cameras were, didn’t care if he was dancing, singing, laughing? Do you know what it was? He lost. I don’t remember all the history, but I imagine that’s when the Supreme Court declared that George Bush would be the President. Al Gore had lost and he had a choice. He could either keep fighting or embrace the fact that he had lost. And in his losing I think he won. Here’s a guy who’d spent his whole life prepping to run for the Presidency of the United States. His father was in politics. It was expected that he would win. There had to be a tremendous amount of pressure. What’s the only thing that could enable him to be free from that pressure? That pressure to constantly perform, to constantly look good, to constantly be on-message? It’s losing. And the moment you realize you’ve lost is the same moment in which you’re free to actually dance. The reason that more of you don’t dance, and I don’t mean in here [church] and I don’t mean out in public, I mean just in the quietness of your heart and your own quiet room. The reason you and I don’t dance before God is because we really don’t believe that we’re losers. We really don’t believe that we bring nothing to the table, because if we really believe that we have nothing to offer God, that we brought nothing to the table and we came to Him and knew that He had given us everything, how could you not dance? Even if that’s just in the quiet of your heart, how can your heart not dance? That’s the great news that actually derives from the bad news. Think about that.