

January 8, 2017

When Judgment Is Good News

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Luke 3:1-22

[The Proclamation of John the Baptist]

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

⁷ John said 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? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit

and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In Luke, John the Baptist is simply *John*. Luke mentions nothing about his hair, his clothes, or his diet. He’s a prophet more in the tradition of Isaiah than Elijah.

From the other gospels we learn of his radical faith. He was part of the Essenes – Jews who lived away from Jerusalem, in the desert, in protest of the Temple’s collaboration with Rome. They were a particularly pious bunch; some would call them *fundamentalists*, maybe even *zealots*. They had little patience with mainstream religion – its compromises with the world.

They were Jews focused on waiting and praying for the Messiah to come soon, believing His coming would change positively everything, for every person who encountered Him. So they had to preach; to let others know and invite them to repent; to be ready when Messiah came; to be found faithful; to be saved. *Repentance*, according to Luke, amounts to a change in human behavior. Birthright means nothing to him.

Being born Jewish was not an exemption from penalty nor an excuse for failure.
(Craddock, p. 47)

Repentance consists of the most everyday choices a human being makes: about food, about possessions, about how one does his/her job. John’s preaching is positively unfiltered. He reads the same Bible to religious and nonreligious people, to the powerful just as to the commoner. Which means he offended people right and left.

Jews were no doubt stunned to hear tax collectors and Roman soldiers asking Bible study questions. But how stunned they were at the questions did not compare to how outraged they had to be next, when John offered them as easy a route to salvation as he offered anyone else. Tax collectors and soldiers, mind you! With the same repentance requirements as Jews themselves! Getting saved alongside upright, religious people!!

John read their thoughts: “Don’t even start with how you all are ‘children of Abraham,’” he said, “God can raise ‘children of Abraham’ from the rocks on the ground!” John’s

message of repentance is so simple. In the Messiah's world (we would say "*In Jesus' world*"):

- ❖ *In Jesus' world*, it's wrong for you to have two coats and another person near you have no coat.
- ❖ *In Jesus' world*, it's wrong to have more food than you need while someone near you doesn't have enough.
- ❖ *In Jesus' world*, it's wrong to use your position at work to benefit yourself at the expense of others.

It may very well be legal. It may very well be expected by your friends, neighbors and employer. And if you choose to do so, it's entirely your business. But IF you are asking how the Messiah expects you to live, here it is: share deeply and don't exploit your personal privilege.

We have one sermon of John's. He went around preaching this – for months, most likely – offending people right and left, lowest-born to highest-bred. Country Jews to Emperor Tiberius' right-hand-man in Galilee, Herod Antipas. Herod had married his brother's wife, which Leviticus 18:16 forbids, and John called him on it – publicly. (Here is another case of a prophet reading Israel's own Bible back to her – and Israel not liking it, not one bit.) *The marriage*, Luke says, and Herod's *other evils*. I'm still betting it's when John starting meddling in his sex life that Herod put him jail.

It's easy to whip up on Herod. As I've said before, he was a thin-skinned man with more power than sense. But it's also possible to generate some sympathy. There is no doubt in my mind that HIS father, Herod the Great, had *reactive attachment disorder*. This happens in infancy when a child fails to bond with a primary caregiver.

RAD essentially condemns a person to a lifetime of emotional isolation:

- ❖ They cannot form healthy relationships.
- ❖ They lack the capacity for empathy.
- ❖ It's nearly impossible to overcome.
- ❖ RAD kids usually become sociopaths, though not necessarily violent.

And if they are allowed to raise kids, those kids are going to be messed up.

Herod Antipas could not bear criticism, not even from a religious hack in the Galilean countryside. So he jailed him, thinking he would shut him up once and for all – when in fact, what Herod really did, was play into the very narrative of John's own message and the gospel itself.

Who was John? *The voice of the one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord."* He was the one showing the way of the Lord. The way of the Lord is the way of what, friends? The way of the cross. Exactly. As John goes, so Jesus will go –

beginning in Galilee, eventually before Herod himself. Why doesn't Jesus lift a finger to help John out of prison?

Mary's song in Luke 2 and Jesus' own first sermon both include *release of the captives* as central to His mission (along with *sight to the blind* and *healing to the lame*). Yet in Luke 7, when talking about John in prison, Jesus conveniently doesn't mention that one. Why? I don't know either. But I have a hunch.

My hunch is that Jesus wasn't talking about disciples in this list. My hunch is: it's because *worldly jail* is normative to Christian discipleship, that it has been from the beginning. Jesus, most of the apostles, thousands of Christians over the centuries spent time in prison for preaching the gospel – or, for their simple association with Christ.

My New Testament professor, Alan Culpepper, was born to Baptist missionary parents in Brazil around 1949. His parents were first assigned to China in 1941. They traveled by ship and were on layover in the Philippines when Pearl Harbor was bombed. They spent the next four years in a Japanese prison camp. Mrs. Culpepper had an appendectomy with no anesthesia, performed by a missionary doctor who was also a prisoner. They both lost one third of their body weight. They weren't sure she'd ever be healthy enough to carry babies, but she did.

Andrew Brunson is a Presbyterian pastor in prison in Turkey today. He's pastored the same church, about the same size as us, actually, for 23 years. They are known and loved by Turkish people, Christian and Muslim. In October he and his wife were arrested for allegedly collaborating with the group that led the coup last summer. She was released and he was sent to prison. (*Christianity Today*, 12/16)

Nineteen years ago, I sought the counsel of a much older, wiser minister about accepting this position as pastor of UBC. Sometimes his answer haunts me a little. He said, "*Well, I think they are smart to want you. But if you are any good at it at all, chances are good you won't last long.*" Is it me? Or maybe it's you?

It wasn't John. He sure didn't last very long. His preaching has an urgency that overrides common sense. His want of Jesus overrides his need to be loved, or respected, or even liked. His confidence that Jesus is the correction to everything corrupt and broken has clouded his perspective, so that personal safety and professional longevity have lost their value altogether.

All that matters is Jesus. All that matters is that people hear that Jesus is coming to judge the world, to sort out *the wheat from the chaff, the useful from the useless* – both AMONG us, and WITHIN us. And that they realize this is really good news. That judgment itself is really, really good news. Because everything that is broken and corrupt in this world – *reactive attachment disorder* being a most perfect example – stems from the human incapacity to separate *what is useful* from *what isn't*, in one's self, in one's relationships, and among ourselves as a species.

How does the world express what it considers valuable? What does a really successful college football coach earn? Jim Harbaugh is highest-paid this year at \$9MM. What does a really successful first grade teacher make? Harder to research, so I limited it to Ann Arbor, for comparison to Mr. Harbaugh. After several years, with normal wage increases, salary tops out at \$57,833.00. A person who wins *ten* football games a year is 150x more valuable than a person who teaches humans to read. As a culture, we're okay with that. And honestly I'm not sure Jesus cares one way or the other about football vs. first grade.

But as a culture, we are also okay with kids going hungry. And wars in other people's backyards. We are okay with shameless wealth built from the sweat and toil of workers whose wages don't meet their own basic needs. And I only have to read the Bible to know that Jesus cares about that... very much. Repentance is simple enough to understand: give one of your coats to someone who doesn't have one; share the food in your cupboard; don't use your privilege, professional or otherwise, to exploit others. It may be legal. It may very well be expected by the world where you live. But the world doesn't know what you know. The world doesn't know that Jesus intends for his people to be useful to his purposes.

So. To selfishness and hoarding and exploitation, Jesus says, *No!* To sharing, generosity and kindness, Jesus says, *Yes please!*

Isn't that something?! John got sent to jail for preaching that!! And in the only sermon of his available for us to read, he's essentially saying what kindergarten teachers say: "*Share. Give. Be nice.*" And then, also, "*Don't sleep with your brother's wife.*"

Do as Jesus did, and if you're any good at all at it, chances are you may not get to do it very long. Which is exactly as it was meant to be from the very start.