

Luke 3:1-20

*John's Ministry of Preparation: Shaking up the Status Quo*

January 14, 2009

## Introduction

Last weekend Barb & I had the privilege along with Aimee of visiting some good friends in central Oregon with whom we worked in Central Asia. It was a very good trip in every respect and we thank you for your prayers. The return trip started last Sunday morning at 7am and conditions were perfect for driving. The sky was clear; a full moon close to the horizon; the rising sun lighting up the snow-covered mountains with an orange hue. The roads were dry and straight with little traffic and we were making good time. Coming over the brow of a hill, we could see quite a few amber flashing lights in the distance. As we drew closer we saw what was going on. Some house movers were taking advantage of the light traffic to move a house down the highway. We happened to approach them just as they entered a narrow stretch of highway where the width of the house was exactly the same as the width of the whole roadway. Needless to say we were slowed to a crawl for the next 20 minutes or so as we followed the lumbering house on wheels along the roadway with no means of access around it. As we drove we wondered what had happened to any oncoming traffic. Every so often we would come across a car waiting in a driveway or a roadside pullout area – how did they know to do that?? Well, after some time the road widened and we were able to pass by the house on the road and as you might expect what we found as we moved ahead of the ‘house on the road’ was at least 5 or 6 more pickup trucks with orange flashing lights. At the front of the pack we came across a lady in a pickup who would get far enough ahead of the convoy and actually stop the traffic and speak with the drivers. We might imagine her saying something like this: *“There is something very big and very surprising coming toward you. If you choose to ignore this message, there will be very bad consequences for you – in fact you will most certainly crash and burn. There is, however, a way out of this potential disaster. It will require you to make a very specific change in direction – you must turn off of the road that you are on. Do you see that safety pull-out area just up there? My strong recommendation to you is that you take refuge there and then watch from there to see this great sight that is coming down the road.”*

This, my friends, is a simplistic illustration of the profound ministry of John the Baptizer. At its core John’s message a wake-up call; it is a message of preparation – ‘something very big is coming down the road; to not pay attention to what is coming is to risk everything. Life itself is at stake!’

The essence of the role of this one who is described as ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’ is that of shaking up the status quo in order that ‘all flesh might see the salvation of God!

The question I would like us to ask ourselves this morning as we observe this first part of Luke 3 is this: **What can we learn from John’s message and ministry that will help us make sense of what God is asking us to do in this time and place?** There are 3 observations about John’s ministry I would like us to make that will help to frame our take-home lesson:

- A ministry that points to Jesus
- A ministry that has a sense of urgency
- A ministry that calls for radical transformation of values

I believe there are some very direct connections that we can make between the kind of ministry John is called to and the kind of ministry to which God is calling us right here at Oaklands Chapel.

### **Background**

First, though, let us step back briefly and put our story in its context. We began this series in Luke on the last Sunday of November last year. We paid attention to the skill with which Luke crafts his story about Jesus. This whole Gospel is a story that is not only well researched and historically accurate; it is a story that is magnificently crafted – it is a masterpiece of literature. The bulk of the story is about the public ministry of Jesus – that is why we are calling our study ‘walking beside Jesus for a while’. Our goal is to listen closely to what Jesus says; to watch carefully what He does; and to learn from Him the values that are important in the kingdom of God. This ‘public ministry’ part of the story begins at 4:13. What Luke is doing in these early chapters is to make absolutely certain that by the time we get to 4:13, the reader will know beyond a shadow of a doubt who Jesus is and they will know for certain that this is Someone absolutely unique in the history of the world and One who is absolutely worth paying attention to!

A big part of the preparation work in Luke’s writing has to do with this character who becomes known as John the Baptizer. All of the Gospel writers make mention of John, but Luke gives his story the most airtime. In chapter 1 we saw how the story of John’s birth paralleled the birth of Jesus. Now, in these early verses of chapter 3 Luke gives us the most detailed description of the actual message of

John to the people of Israel. Where the other gospel writers seem to pay more attention to his outer appearance, Luke seems to want us to know 2 primary factors about John:

- where John fits in the historical and prophetic tradition and
- the specific nature of his message and ministry

Luke begins chapter 3 by identifying no less than 6 political and religious leaders of the day in order to root the message of John in its historical context. I believe there are 2 reasons for this. First it lends credibility to the historicity of this person John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This is not just a made up story; this is a real character who lived and carried out his ministry during a particular time in human history as marked by the political and religious leaders of the day.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason why Luke is so careful about these historical references is because it ties John's ministry very much back into the Old Testament prophetic tradition. If you are doing the small group questions this week (on the back of the bulletin) you'll notice that one of the questions asks you to compare the early verses of Luke 3 with the beginning of Isaiah 1 and Jeremiah 1. In fact, many of the prophets of the OT are introduced in a very similar way - the language is designed to give authority to the messenger. And so we find here, "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar... the word of the Lord came to John the son of Zechariah.*"

The early readers of Luke were also readers of the Old Testament and so they would get this language. John is one who speaks with authority because he comes in the tradition of the prophets with a message from God for a particular time and place.

And so we return to our question: **What can we learn from John's message and ministry that will help us make sense of what God is asking us to do in this time and place?**

### 1. A ministry that points to Jesus

- a. From the very beginning to the very end of the account of John, it is clear that John's role is entirely about pointing to Someone greater than himself! Let's look at 2 examples here.
- b. First is the prophecy of Isaiah which Luke suggests that John's ministry is to fulfill.
  - i. The language in 3:4-6 is all about preparing the way so the "all mankind will see God's salvation." It is about creating a level field so that there is a line of sight for

everyone to be able to see what God was going to doing in bringing salvation to the earth through His Son Jesus!

- ii. It is also about waking people up who were comfortably religious in order that they might know that God’s judgment against sin is coming upon the world.
  - iii. This involves raising up the valleys; bringing down the hills and high places
    - 1. This language reminds us of Mary’s song of praise (the Magnificat) where she sang about how God “*brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble*” (1:52).
    - 2. And so we see John bringing the baptism of repentance to the poor and humble while at the same time speaking hard words against the injustices carried out by Herod.
  - iv. All of this work by John is for the purpose of making it possible for all mankind to see the salvation of God!
- c. The second place we see John’s ministry pointing to Jesus is in 3:15-18.
- i. The people of Israel are so impressed by the power of his words and the authority by which he teaches that they begin to muse regarding whether or not this could be the promised Messiah.
  - ii. John is very quick to jump on top of this and clearly says that “One more powerful than I will come”
  - iii. He shows great humility with the use of the sandal imagery “the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”.
    - 1. Leon Morris in his commentary on Luke quotes a rabbinic saying which probably comes from somewhere near this time period: “*Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong.*”<sup>1</sup>
    - 2. In other words, the loosing of the sandal-tie was considered the work of slaves only – and John says he is not even worthy of doing that work for the Messiah who was to come.
    - 3. In another place, John is recorded as saying “He must increase, I must decrease”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> quoted by Leon Morris in *The Gospel According to Luke* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 97.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:30

- d. We see therefore in the life and ministry of John one who was entirely consumed with the purpose of pointing people to Jesus.
  - i. We must ask ourselves the question – how about our lives?
  - ii. When people looked at John, they saw Jesus. What do people see when they look at our lives? Do they see the values of Jesus in the way we treat people; in the way we do business? Could it be that they see a church-goer who seems to do the external religious things but who seems caught up in worries; in the riches of the world; in personal achievement and career advancement?
- e. John’s entire life and ministry were focused on pointing people to Jesus – we need to be challenged about our role in this world which desperately needs the message of Jesus given the dramatic signs of uncertainty and fear.

## 2. A ministry that has a sense of urgency

- a. This is where we see John stirring up the status quo by his words and actions.
- b. I believe the core of John’s verbal message may be characterized in the phrase, “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*” (v. 8).
- c. The people to whom he seemed to be directing his most harsh comments are those who were comfortable with the external form of religion but who did not allow their whole lives to be transformed by faith in the living God.
  - i. These were Jewish religious leaders who felt that because they were children of Abraham that they had a right to be part of God’s kingdom; that they were automatically protected from the judgment of God.
    - 1. Theirs was a theory of entitlement.
  - ii. With these people, John holds nothing back! “You brood of vipers”
  - iii. William Barclay picks up the imagery of the vipers: “*The face of the desert was covered with stubble and brushwood, as dry as tinder. Sometimes a spark set the face of the desert alight and out from their crannies came the vipers, scurrying in terror from the menacing flames. It was to them John likened the people who came to be baptized.*”<sup>3</sup>
- d. It is, in fact, quite easy for us to look back and look down upon the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the teachers of the law and to shake our heads and wonder why they just didn’t get it!

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Burlington, ON Canada: Welch Publishing Co., 1975) 33.

- i. Why couldn't they see that God was after more than just the external form of religion?
- e. My friends, I believe that God wants us to step back and look at our own situation from a different perspective.
  - i. Could it be that we have fallen into a very similar place to where the religious Jews of John's day were living?
  - ii. Could it be that we have become comfortable with a form of Sunday morning worship and maybe some small group involvement but we have lost the sense of urgency that accompanies the Good News of Jesus?
  - iii. Could it be that we've forgotten the reality that Jesus could return any day and that when He comes He will bring the final judgment against evil?
  - iv. Could it be that we've forgotten that even if Jesus doesn't return to this earth for another 10,000 years, that He still loves us and dearly wants us to be transformed from the inside out and to be living passionately according to the values of the Kingdom of God in every area of our lives?
- f. I don't know exactly what God is up to at Oaklands Chapel right now, but I believe that He is doing some things to get our attention!
  - i. Many of you have expressed to Barb and me that you are praying every day for a miracle of healing in Barb's life. We humbly thank you for that and join with you in that prayer.
  - ii. Alongside of that prayer and the many other prayers that we also pray for others who are suffering in various physical, emotional and relational ways, let me also ask you to pray earnestly that we at Oaklands Chapel would embrace fully what it is that God wants to teach us through these hard events.
- g. I do believe that God wants to do something very special through the ministry of this congregation. I also know that God wants us to increasingly become like John the Baptist where our lives individually and our lives corporately become urgently and fully committed to the task of pointing people to Jesus!
  - i. Pray urgently with me that even in the midst of many other unanswered questions about sickness, suffering and healing, that we may learn to be increasingly effective conduits of the message of the Good News of Jesus in the face of the coming judgment.

- h. So far, then, in answer to our question, “What can we learn from John’s message and ministry that will help us make sense of what God is asking us to do in this time and place?”, we’ve learned that John’s ministry was one that pointed people to Jesus and did it with a sense of urgency.
- i. Let us now look briefly at some of the specific values that John called the people to live by.

### 3. A ministry that calls for radical transformation of values

- a. In response to the radical preaching of this fiery character, 3 different groups of people respond with exactly the same question: “What should we do??” They wanted to know exactly how they should “produce fruit in keeping with repentance”.
  - i. The **crowd** – probably a reference to the general response from the people as they heard the message
  - ii. The **tax collectors**
  - iii. The **soldiers**
- b. To each of these groups John responds with some very specific instruction (v. 10-14).
- c. To the crowd he says, “*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same*”.
  - i. There is a challenging value of equality in the life of the Kingdom of God. This is reflective of the prophecy of Isaiah that we saw earlier as the low places are filled in and the high places are brought down.
  - ii. I don’t know how all of this works out in our own life and experience, but I do know from here and many other places in Scripture that God has a special place for the poor in His heart and His anger is often displayed toward those who abuse the poor, the widows and orphans.
  - iii. The value called for here is **compassion**!
- d. To the tax collectors he says, “*Don’t collect any more than you are required to*”.
  - i. This, of course, was a practice for which the tax collectors were hated!
  - ii. The value upheld here is that of **justice** – especially as it relates to business practices. The OT expresses God’s hatred for unjust balances. In our dealings with people we are called to be fair, open and honest.
- e. To the soldiers he says, “*Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.*”
  - i. A couple of values seem to surface in this reply from John

1. Don't use your position of power to abuse people = **respect** for all
  2. Be satisfied with what you have = **contentment**
- f. And so to the question of how to produce fruit in keeping with repentance John has very specific and radical answers:
- i. To a society divided he called for the values of equality and compassion
  - ii. To those who made their living by taking more money than they were supposed to he called for justice and equity in business practice
  - iii. To those who held positions of authority in a world of extreme military might he called for respect and contentment.

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### Conclusion

We have been asking the question: **What can we learn from John's message and ministry that will help us make sense of what God is asking us to do in this time and place.** We've already been challenged to consider how our lives are pointing people to Jesus or not. We've been challenged to question whether or not we were living out our faith with a sense of urgency or whether we've been lulled into just floating along with the status quo of attending church and doing the external things.

I want to close with the challenge from John to 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance'. I want to bring it right down to where we live and have us examine our hearts as we conclude. As you examine your life I want to mention 3 areas of life where we commonly get it wrong in our time and place. As I mention these areas, please ask the Lord to show you if there is some way in which you need to 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance'.

- Money: is there some aspect in either your attitude toward money or in your use or abuse of it that you need to repent of? Bring that before the Lord and commit it to Him; seek help if you need it!
- Sex: if you are actively involved in sexual activity outside of a committed marriage relationship then you are living outside of God's design for life. Today is the day you need to call upon the Lord for forgiveness and begin to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.
- Relationships: is there some relationship that is conflicted because you have been using or abusing power? Is there a relationship where you need to show more love, grace, compassion or kindness?

This is a very personal time between you and your Lord. Let me invite you to join me in a minute of silent prayer as we close. In this time, ask the Lord to speak to you clearly about 1 specific thing that may need attention in your life. After this Caleb Opper will come and lead us in our Prayer of Intercession.