

“The Preacher Who Turned People Away”

Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:2-22

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John Wesley, the 18th century English reformer from whom we Wesleyans get our name, once famously told his preachers that “you have nothing to do but save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work...[Your business is to] save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.” It was an important reminder in his time, when preachers could be tempted by the lure of respectability and decorum, by being a part of the established, traditional way of going about religion in the Church of England at the time. It’s an important reminder for us today, as well, when we face some of the same temptations to respectability, but we also see pastors who lead the church as little more than a social club or social service agency, while others seem to work at keeping their church as small as possible by angrily railing against anyone and everyone on the outside who doesn’t conform to their views. It’s an important reminder to all of us, preachers or not, that our lives in Christ are to be lived for more than ourselves, that we are to be reproducing and raising new Christians by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

There are lots of other ways we could rephrase Wesley’s instruction to “save as many souls as you can,” because whether you’re a die-hard Wesleyan or not, most people probably picture the role of a preacher as being to save as many souls as they can, to get the message out to as many people as possible. Certainly there are examples of angry preachers whom nobody likes, but the expectation many of us have is that a preacher ought to be the sort of person who draws people toward God, not drives them away. We might have different ideas of *how* to draw people to God, but most of us probably expect preachers to have that as their goal.

But that’s not the sort of preacher John the Baptist was. In Luke’s gospel we are introduced to him as being the fulfillment of ancient prophecies from Isaiah, and the very first words we hear out of his mouth are definitely a challenge to John Wesley’s instructions to preachers. He obviously has a message that people are drawn to, and yet his response is to call those people a “brood of vipers.” In Matthew’s telling of the story, John uses those words against the Pharisees and Sadducees, those stock villains of self-righteousness who sometimes deserved their reputation. But here in Luke’s gospel, John’s speech is directed generally against the crowds that come out to hear his message. There may be times when a preacher is tempted to greet an entire congregation by calling them a “brood of vipers,” but that’s usually not good pastoral etiquette.

In the space of a couple of verses, we go from Isaiah’s comforting promise that “all people will see God’s salvation” to John’s scolding cry: “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” He tells these crowds that they need to repent, and if they truly repent, meaning to change direction, then that repentance will demonstrate itself by bearing fruit. But, if you’re a first-century Jew, you might be tempted to argue with John about the need for that kind of repentance. Because in some peoples’ minds, being a Jew was all you needed: you were born into the covenant with God by virtue of being born a descendant of Abraham, and surely that status can’t just be lost easily. But no, John tells them, don’t get comfortable, because “out of these stones God can raise up children of Abraham.” No, “the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good

fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Being a tree in the orchard isn’t enough; all the trees need to bear fruit.

What sort of message is that for John to preach? Is he just an angry preacher? Is that his shtick: some preachers are great storytellers, some are great scholars, some are great comedians, but John’s thing is that he’s surly and insulting? Or is he just having a bad day? Shouldn’t a church consultant or the author on some book on leadership take John aside and tell him not to be so confrontational, and that he’s running the risk of, dare I say it, *shrinking* his congregation rather than growing it? The crowds coming out to him are clearly interested; they’re almost desperate to hear a message from this man. Most preachers would give an arm to have a congregation as responsive as John’s: he calls them a “brood of vipers,” and they ask him, “What should we do then?” Let’s try that: I’ll insult all of you, and then you let me know how much you care about what I want you to do. Tax collectors, notorious for their greed, treachery, and collaboration with the Romans, come out to hear him, and *they* want to know how to repent. Soldiers, too, probably not even Jews; these are foreign occupiers who want to hear John’s message.

Why is John so harsh? The gospel actually calls this “the good news” in verse 18, but it sure doesn’t sound that good to me. “The ax is already at the root of the trees.” The Messiah’s “winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” It’s fair to argue that part of it is just John’s style: he’s an old-time prophet bringing a difficult message to a nation in trouble, he’s an apocalyptic figure separating light from darkness, he’s the prophet who will anoint the coming King and call the people to unswerving loyalty. But even so, why does he react to these crowds the way he does?

Maybe part of it is the question of motives. What brought these people out here in the first place? “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath” might be rephrased as asking, “Why are you here?” What brought these people out here? What are they looking to accomplish? They’re clearly hungry for something, but what? And are they willing to do what is needed to get it?

Several chapters later in Luke’s gospel, Jesus has an encounter with John’s followers, and after that encounter Jesus addresses the crowds concerning John. A big part of the focus of what Jesus says has to do with the motivations of those crowds. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?” He asks them. “A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?” Because it’s one thing to be hungry for something, but it’s another thing to know what you need to satisfy that hunger. So perhaps John is so confrontational because he senses that the motivations of these people might not be right. Maybe he’s wondering if they’ve come out into the wilderness for the right reasons.

I suspect their motives were not all that different than the motives of people in our society today, even though things are much different in our culture. Surely many of the people in those crowds had the right motives, because John’s movement did make a difference, and there were people who became disciples of John out of those crowds. But many people surely had the wrong motives. They were hungry enough to ask “what should we do?” but were they willing to listen to what it would take to satisfy their hunger, or did they just want to get some junk food instead?

What might be some of our motives today? What are some of the things that motivate us to go into the wilderness in search of satisfaction for our hunger? Many people go looking for a show. They want to be entertained and wowed. They would be quite happy, at least for the moment, if John would give them the *experience* of religion. Whether through music or magic or comedy or whatever else, give me the *feeling* that I've seen something amazing and transcendent. People enjoyed spectacle in John's day, and it's true now as well. Some people look for it in the church, and some look for it in the many spectacles offered by the world.

Many people go out looking for cheap grace. They want more than just a show, and they're willing to do something if the preacher tells them what to do, but they're not about to upend their lives. They want to experience the benefits of religion at a bargain price. This has always been true among some people; we see it today. Many people want the community and the comfort and the assurance religion can bring, but they reject the reordering of their lives that happens when God moves into your life.

Many people go out into the wilderness looking for some sort of self-righteousness. They're willing to make sacrifices, and they're not looking for cheap grace. They'll pay a steep price, but they still want to be in charge. So they go out looking for rules to follow, and they find their security in keeping those rules, and they use those rules to judge other people they think are unworthy. Christians have often had a bad rap on this count, and it's certainly true that there have been many self-righteous people calling themselves Christians through the years. But it's also an epidemic outside the church, even among secular people. Even agnostic or atheist groups have their list of rules, spoken or unspoken, by which you are judged, and which those in the group use to feel justified.

Maybe John addresses the crowd so confrontationally because he's not sure they've come for the right reasons. You're bound to get a variety of motives in any crowd. So John hits them square between the eyes with what he's preaching about: nothing less than the re-ordering of the world according to the coming reign of God. It means things will be radically different, so if you're someone who has gotten ahead through ill-gotten gains or abuse of others, you'd better make things right. The anointed King is at hand, and He's going to make things right, so you might as well get a head start. That's one of the things that the Gospel of Luke emphasizes: the re-ordering involved in making things right. Three of the four gospel books use the same quote from Isaiah when introducing John as the "voice of one calling in the wilderness," but only Luke's account includes the second half about valleys being filled in, mountains being made low, and roads being straightened and smoothed. The original meaning was in reference to the building of a royal highway, but the further implication is that things will be re-ordered when the King comes. What's more, John's message in this passage is one of redistribution and equality in society. There's an emphasis on justice-making when God arrives.

This is the difference: many people in the crowds, and many people in our crowds today, head into the wilderness looking for all sorts of satisfaction for their hunger. But what John is preaching is that God is coming. The presence of God is what the message is all about, and when God arrives, He comes to establish His Lordship, and that means the re-ordering of those things that are contrary to His order. John preaches that things will be re-ordered because the Lord Himself is at hand. The crowds want all kinds of things, but do they want the presence of God? This is what John is

challenging them with. If you can't handle His Lordship, you can't handle His presence. And the opposite is true, too: if you want God, you want His order as well.

And as if on cue, Jesus arrives to be baptized. Today is the Sunday when the church celebrates the baptism of Jesus, this moment of anointing when it is declared that He is the Messiah sent by God to be the presence of God among us. John's confrontational attitude braces us for the judgment of God, and then it is answered with the presence of God. The tension we feel between Isaiah's promise that "all people will see God's salvation" and John's exclamation "you brood of vipers" is resolved by the presence of God Himself. There is an ongoing debate within the church and within individual Christians' lives about how to reconcile the judgment of God with the love of God. How do we make sense of the book of Isaiah, which is full of terrible promises of doom, but also contains magnificent promises of love, as we read in chapter 43? How do we make sense of the claim that John is preaching good news when he says that "the ax is already at the root of the trees"? Do we have two Gods: an angry, capricious God of the Old Testament, and a nice, pushover God of the New Testament? No. We reconcile the tension with the presence of God, which is both beautiful and terrible to behold. His presence satisfies your every longing, but He also makes you squirm in your unholiness. He judges because He is present, and He is present because He loves.

What brings you out into the wilderness of worship? Why have you come, at the beginning of this new year, out of the bustle of the world and into the strange wilds of the community of God's people? We gather in praise of God because He has come, and because He has promised to be present among His people and in His world. We gather so that our lives can be rightly ordered by the presence of our Lord, so that we can go out in love for Him and one another, and so that we can be doers of the justice of His kingdom. Why have you come? And what will be your motives in seeking God in this year? Will you seek nothing less than the presence of the Living God in your life this year, or will you settle for something less?



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