



It's the Little Things That Matter

TEXT
Luke 3:1-14
Malachi 4:1-6

December 4, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Luke says the crowds came out to John. John wasn't in the places of power, but in the wilderness. So people had to search for him. You would be forgiven if you expected the prophet to be found in the temple or the synagogue, but not John. He's a wilderness guy.

Don't think *beautiful wilderness*. It's not quiet streams and beautiful sunsets ... think *lost*. Because to say John is in the wilderness is not just a geographical statement; it is a spiritual statement. John is in the wilderness not because he is lost; he is in the wilderness because everyone else is lost.

Luke says, in the wilderness, with many exhortations, John proclaimed the good news. Really? Good news? Did you listen to John? Does this sound like good news to you?

You brood of vipers, repent! You sons of snakes! Don't tell me how important your Daddy is, I don't care ... repent! It's time for your life to bear some good fruit. The ax is already at the root of the tree. Now repent.

"With many exhortations, John proclaimed the good news."

It makes you wonder why people would go out to hear that.

It's not very winsome. I have been preaching for 30 years, and I have not even once called the congregation a brood of vipers. (I'm not saying I didn't think about it a time or two, but I never did it.)

So why did folks go out to see John? Maybe because they had a suspicion that they were lost!

Let's step back from this a bit and let me do a little Bible study with you.

We read from Malachi, another reading that sounds more than a little harsh. It sounds like the prophet says there are some righteous people and the evildoers, and God is going to punish the evildoers. But that is a dangerous way to read this text. The more honest way is to remember the truth about all of us, and all of us are a mixed bag. We offer God a life that is a mixture of blessing and brokenness. None of us is righteous, not all the time. And the truth is, if we could, we would love to remove the evil from our lives. The promise of the prophet is that God will redeem us. It's good news.

But more to the point of this passage, it is clear from reading the New Testament that the followers of Jesus understood

John the Baptist to fulfill some promises the ancient prophets declared. There were some old prophecies about Elijah.

Elijah was one of the great prophets of Ancient Israel. We read the final verses of the Hebrew Bible, Chapter 4 from Malachi. There God promises that before the final work of redemption, God will send Elijah. Before God's ultimate day of redemption occurs, Elijah will return.

Now the ancients did not believe that literally, but they did believe that God would send a prophet, in the spirit of Elijah, who would declare God's ultimate work of redemption was beginning. So when Elijah showed up, or the spirit of Elijah more accurately, then the redemption of God was near ... salvation was coming to the lost.

If you visit a Jewish family for feast times, they will keep an empty chair at the table. It's for Elijah — in case Elijah returns during the feast. It would be embarrassing not to have a place for him to sit. If you are with Jewish friends during a feast, don't sit in that chair, by the way. They will think you don't know what you are doing. Or they may think, "Who knew Elijah was Presbyterian?"

Well, the Gospel writers all interpreted John the Baptist as Elijah. John fulfills what was promised in Malachi, which means God's promised day begins in Jesus. It means that in the coming of Jesus, life in this world is redeemed, is made new. God is bringing salvation.

And John is trying to get this point across. The time matters now.

I don't care who your father is, John says, because your yesterdays are not important; it is today that matters. Bear good fruit today.

But then something happens that's a bit surprising — surprising and so very hopeful.

John's fiery sermon ends, and the response is almost pedestrian. He begins, *You brood of vipers, change your ways ... even now the ax is at the root of the trees ... the chaff will be thrown onto the fire.* It's scary enough to keep you from sleeping for a month.

People responded to John, pleading: *Tell us, what do we do? What do we do?*

John says, *If you have two coats, share.*

Tax collectors asked him, *What do we do?*

Don't cheat anyone, John says.

Soldiers asked him, *What do we do?*

Don't abuse your power.

All of a sudden, this fire-breathing wilderness prophet turns into our preschool teacher.

The ax is at the root of the tree, what do we do?

Share. Don't hit people. Be fair.

The salvation of God is coming, and the demands to participate in God's work of redemption are pretty simple. *Treat other people right.*

Here's what I find so helpful in this passage. John says, to participate in the redemptive work of God in this world, the small stuff matters. Don't worry about yesterday. Don't worry that you can't fix it all. Just do what is yours to do.

Share. Be fair. Tell the truth. Remember that your neighbor matters. It's not dramatic stuff, but it matters.

Do you ever feel lost, like your life is falling apart, your family is falling apart? Sometimes it's because of global things. Sometimes it's because of internal matters. But most of us know what it is to feel lost. And when we do, the promises of salvation and peace and even hope can seem too abstract, too big to wrap our arms around.

When we feel a little lost, we need something manageable that makes a difference. Here John says God's greatest work of salvation is coming, so get ready. Pay attention to the small stuff.

It was almost 20 years ago now a story appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. The story was about a Catholic nun, Sister Helen Mroska, who had taught school in the western Minnesota community of Morris for many years. The story told of Sister Helen's remembrance of an especially difficult Friday in 1965 when her students, frustrated by some difficult math problems, became cranky and edgy. So she told them on a whim to put the

problems aside and take out a clean sheet of paper and to make a list of their classmates' names. Then she told them to think of the kindest thing they could say about each of their classmates.

She collected the lists at the end of the period and then took them home. Over the weekend, she wrote the name of each student in the class one-by-one on separate sheets of paper, and then listed for each one all the good things their classmates had written about them. On Monday, she handed back to the students the compiled lists.

A half-dozen years later, in the summer of 1971, Sister Helen learned that one of those students, Mark Eklund, had been killed in Vietnam. His parents called with the news and invited her to come to his funeral. She went, and afterward, visited with the family and a group of Mark's classmates, her old students, at the family home. "We want to show you something," Mark's father told her, and he brought out a wallet and took from it a piece of paper. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." The piece of paper had obviously been folded and refolded many times. It was the paper on which she had written all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him.

Mark's mother thanked Sister Helen, "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Then some of Mark's classmates chimed in. "I still have my list," Charlie said. "It's in the top drawer of my desk at home."

“I have mine, too,” Marilyn said. “It’s in my diary.”

Vickie pulled her list from her pocketbook, “I carry this with me at all times,” she said.¹

Here’s what I’m saying: It’s easy to feel lost. The world is more than a little bit crazy.

I find myself wishing I knew some big thing to do, some bold act of faithfulness to offer that would bring some healing to the broken places, some hope to the hopeless places, some help to the needing places. But I don’t know what to do.

And yet, over and over and over again, the wisdom of our faith teaches us: Share. Don’t hurt people. Be fair.

It’s simple, and yet I suppose our faith teaches us this over and over again because it’s not so simple. We forget or get distracted or doubt that what we do matters.

So on those days when you feel a bit lost, and you don’t know what to do, follow the others who are seeking the old prophet John, who reminds us to be kind, be fair, be trustworthy, share.

It may not be the kingdom of God, but it’s a start. And it may be what saves us.

¹I am grateful to Rev. Michael Lindvall, for sharing this with the Moveable Feast in January 1999.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.