



The Good News of the Metanoia Man

TEXT
Luke 3:1–18

December 17, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

John tells us the name of everybody who is anybody. Tiberius was emperor; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod was ruler in Galilee; Caiaphas was high priest. These were the men who defined the way of life.

But the word of God did not come to them — I suppose because God almost never stops at the top of the power chain. And maybe that's because history has shown that the powerful are not so good at listening — often enamored with their own voices.

We will meet these men again: Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas. They will all be there when the world chooses to put Jesus to death. They will be the deciders.

The word of God came not to them, but to a wilderness prophet named John. And when John spoke, people sought him out.

Luke says, with many exhortations, John proclaimed the good news. Did it sound like good news to you?

There is one coming who is mightier than I. The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Already the ax is at the root of the tree, and if you are not good enough, watch out ...

the tree is cut down and thrown onto the fire.

You can't be surprised this is where the sermon ends up when it starts with, *You brood of vipers. You sons of snakes.* I have been preaching a long time, and I have never ever called the congregation a brood of vipers. I'm not saying I haven't thought about it.

I read John, and I want to say, "Give us a break. We are only human. We are doing the best we can. Don't be so angry." Do you think God is angry?

John's not the only preacher to preach like this. One of the most influential American preachers of the colonial period was a man named Jonathan Edwards. In 1757, he became president of the College of New Jersey, which was later known as Princeton University.¹ In one famous sermon, Edwards described God like this:

God holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider over the fire; his wrath towards you burns like fire; ... for you have offended God infinitely. ... There is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up.²

It will not surprise you to know that the title of that sermon is "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

I didn't check, but I don't think I have ever told you that you were like a spider dangling over the pit of fire, fearing that God might just relax the hand and drop you in. I'm pretty sure I have never made that analogy. If I did, I don't think you would come back. So, why do you suppose everyone went out to hear John? And why does Luke call it good news?

If I understand the text, it's not anger so much as it is a strangeness to John. Or better said, he is pointing to a stranger who has come to town. John is talking about Jesus, and John knows Jesus has come to us as one of us. But at the same time, he is not like one of us. He is a stranger.

If I understand it, I think the crowds came because there was something about the strangeness of Jesus for which they hungered.

John says tax collectors came. That's a surprise. The tax collectors were known for being cheats and placing their own interest above their neighbors. The tax collectors were hated, but also lonely.

Maybe they wanted things to be different.

The soldiers came. They were men of power, but they also were always on the front lines of violence. It's not hard to imagine what they were hungering for. "What shall we do?" they all asked.

John says that if you have two coats, you must share with those who have none. You aren't going to get a thank you note for this. And it is not going to work to devise rationalizations as to why the poor deserve to be poor. You don't need as much as you think you do, so share. It's just right.

And if you collect taxes, he said, be fair. You are not going to be honored for being fair. Just treat your neighbor as a human being. It's the right thing to do. If you have power, don't abuse it. Power can quickly eat you alive, so use it with care.

To make sure they understood just how important this was, he then says, "The ax is laid at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown onto the fire."

They might have said, "But John, we are only human. We are doing the best we can." But the prophet invites us to reflect: Are we? Is this the best we can be?

John said, "Repent." The Greek word is *metanoia*. It means "to change, to turn around, to go in a different direction."

It's interesting. When they asked, "What should we do?" his answers were pretty simple.

Share. Be fair. Don't abuse people. It's not rocket science. It makes me wonder if it's not that we don't know what we are supposed to do, we just doubt whether we can do it. The problem is we are so ... human. We mess it up. We even tend to mess up things we care about. But John says, *Repent, turn around. Do it differently.* Is that possible?

In the 1991 movie *Grand Canyon*, Kevin Kline drives into a run-down neighborhood where his car breaks down. It's the dead of night; he can't get his car to restart. While he is waiting for a tow truck to arrive, a gang of intimidating characters shows up.

By the time the tow truck arrives — the driver is played by Danny Glover — things have gotten tense. He attempts to hitch Kline's car to his tow truck. But Glover is confronted. He responds, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here."³

The world ain't supposed to be like this. That's what John says.

Here's what I think. I think the people went out to see John because they knew that. They already knew that things were supposed to be different. What they didn't know was if it is

possible to change. They had lived with the voices of Tiberius and Pilate and Caiaphas for so long, they were wondering, is this just the way it is? They knew their own hearts, and they knew the systems of their world. Does it get better than this?

Is repentance really possible? In Jeannette Wall's book *The Glass Castle*, she narrates her painful childhood, caught in the grasp of supremely dysfunctional parents.

On her tenth birthday, she says, *Dad took me outside to the back patio and asked what I wanted most in the world. "It's a special occasion, seeing as how it puts you into double digits," he said. "You're growing up fast, Mountain Goat. You'll be on your own in no time, and if there's anything I can do for you now, before you're gone, I want to do it."*

There was only one thing I truly wanted ... but I was afraid to ask for it. "What is it?" he said. "Ask away."

"It's big."

"Just ask, baby."

"I'm scared."

"You know if it's humanly possible, I'll get it for you. And if it ain't humanly possible, I'll die trying."

I took a breath and said, "Do you think you could maybe stop drinking?"⁴

Repent? Is change possible in us and in the world? I think they went out to hear the wilderness preacher because they wanted to believe it was. That was the good news. They didn't hear anger in his voice. It

was hope that all that is broken in us and in the world can be redeemed. We do not have to be defined by the worst in us. There is hope.

John says “Repent,” and he points us to the strangeness of Jesus, this life that has come to us, as one of us, but is not like us. And the irony is that this stranger reveals what it really means to be human. What we have so often assumed was human — our weakness, frailty, sin — *that* is inhuman. To be fair and honest and gracious — *that* is human. The son of God has come to show us how to be human.

My grandmother spent as much time as anyone I know studying the scriptures. She taught Sunday school every week from 1933 to 2004. She held no theology degree, but she was of keen mind and deep faith. No visit could pass without a conversation about the scriptures.

A year before she died, she said, “Tom, I want to talk to you about something important. I want to talk to you about my estate.” Important should not be confused with large. “I’m leaving a little bit to your mother.” I expected that. “I’m leaving most of it to the church.” I expected that. She said, “I’ve made a change though. I want to leave a significant gift to Johnson C. Smith Seminary.” I knew she valued theological education, but this was a surprise. Johnson C. Smith?

“Grandma, I thought you might leave something to Columbia.” That is where her

husband and daughter had attended.

She said, “Johnson C. Smith is the only seminary for black people.” That’s what she said at 99 years of age. “Son, I — and the best friends of my life — we were all in this church together. But many good people of my generation have been harsh to black people. I look back, and I see how ugly we were. I can’t change that. Lord knows I wish I could, but I can’t. But I believe that someday we will learn to live more at peace with one another, and maybe this money will help some people tomorrow that I failed to help yesterday.”

I think it was *metanoia*. She was ashamed of herself ... ashamed and grieving. But more than that, far more than that, she was trusting in the life-giving salvation of God that someday life will be more human.

It was an investment in a new day, a place hope takes you, a wager that the baptizer knew what he was talking about when he said God can take the chaff of our life — the dishonesty, the selfishness, the injustice — and God can burn it all in the fires of a holy love that will leave us more beautiful, more human, redeemed.

This prophet John is unsettling. He screams *metanoia*. He is not trying to spread guilt. Listen to him. He says the one who is coming will redeem us. Tomorrow can be a new day. Listen to him carefully. It is not anger in his voice. No, not at all. It is joy — because the

stranger has come to us to redeem us and make us human.

If you have ever yearned for the world to be different, if you have ever hungered for your own life to be different, then no one has to tell you why they all went out to hear John: because this wilderness prophet was speaking good news.

¹Helpful information on Edwards can be found online at the Edwards Center at Yale University.

²Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2*, (reprinted 1986), p. 10

³I am grateful to Rev. Chandler Stokes and his sermon “Longing,” preached Dec. 3, 2017, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids, MI, where he included this scene.

⁴Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (2006), p. 116

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