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The Gospel of Luke
VIII. The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness
Luke 3:1-20

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Luke says that great crowds flocked to hear John the Baptist preach in the wilderness. And not just great crowds, but a great diversity of people – from ordinary folk to more dubious sorts like tax collectors and Roman soldiers. Why would all these people go out into the desert to hear John preach – especially give the content of John’s message? Certainly, curiosity had to have been a factor – for whatever else one might think about John, he sure looked and sounded a lot like two Old Testament prophecies come to life: Isaiah’s prophecy of a voice crying in the wilderness; but, even more, that prophecy from Malachi 4:5 about God sending Elijah back to earth just before the day of the Lord should come. John certainly looked and sounded a whole lot like Elijah come back to earth. So, curiosity about John was definitely a factor.

But Luke offers a second explanation of why the crowds went out to John in the wilderness – namely, that he was preaching “good news” to the people. It’s there in verse 18: “*So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.*” Good news. But how in the world does getting yelled at by John qualify as good news? How is it good news to be told that we are a brood of vipers in need of repentance – and that if we don’t start bearing the fruit of repentance soon, we can count on being cut down and tossed in the fire? How in the world is the preaching of John the Baptist good news? Would you go racing out into the desert to get yelled at by John?

But if the Bible says John’s preaching was good news to the crowds, that means it is also good news to us – as hard as it may be to see it as such. But that’s just it – how we see, or rather how we hear, John’s preaching. If the Bible says John’s preaching is good news and we’re hearing it as bad news, then the problem is not with John but with us and with how we are hearing what he is saying to us. So, we need to rethink this. We need to rehear – or rather, rightly hear – John’s preaching, so that we too can hear just exactly what it is about it that is good news for us.

“*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” It’s hardly, “Welcome everyone, so glad to see you, really appreciate you coming out all this way to be with me.” But underneath that scathing critique there really is something good. John is telling us we are a bunch of sinners who need to repent of our sins – judgment. But we can hear that same sentence in a different way. We are a bunch of sinners who need to repent, and who can begin to repent right now – judgment plus invitation. We are sinners who are, through John, being given the opportunity to acknowledge our sin, come clean about our lives, and so enter into God’s great offer of mercy and forgiveness upon those sins. John isn’t condemning us so much as he is inviting us. The words may be harsh, but the meaning is filled with the good news of God’s grace: that

while we are sinners, we are not forever doomed to carry our sins, repeat our sins, sink down beneath the weight of our guilt and shame. Rather we can repent – and the Lord God will forgive. And that is, indeed, good news.

Doesn't it get tiring, don't you think, to always be pretending that we are better than we really are – keeping up appearances before others and even in our own eyes? Can't we imagine that it would be a great blessing to be able to just tell the truth about ourselves to someone, to lay it all out bare and unvarnished – and then to have that someone say to us, "You know what, I love you anyway. And that's not all, I forgive you. And that's not all – I am going to take all those sins and that shame and guilt away from you forevermore"? Wouldn't that be good news? Not to have to pretend anymore? But to be known and yet still loved? To acknowledge ourselves as sinners and yet still be forgiven?

Frederick Buechner, in his wonderful little theological dictionary, Wishful Thinking, defines confession in this way:

To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.¹

In other words, repentance is not something we do for God in order to earn His love and mercy. Rather, repentance is a gift God offers to us, a possibility God opens up before us, because He already loves us and desires to forgive us. And wants to wash us clean. In other words, good news.

Johann Christoph Arnold has written a wonderful little book on forgiveness, and in it he recounts a letter he received from a man named Steve. Steve describes an ordinary middle-class life that finally began to unravel under the weight of his own selfishness and bad choices. Nothing spectacular, mind you – just run of the mill sin leading to a great deal of hurt and brokenness and damage, like it often does. He turned to the pop psychology of our age, which told him that he shouldn't be so hard on himself, that he was not so bad and that it was probably all his parents' fault anyway for the way they raised him. Not surprisingly, that made him feel better for about fifteen minutes – before he saw right through it and knew it to be useless as an answer to the mess in his life. What did work was when he finally began to own up to and to repent of his sin:

The pivotal experience came inexplicably and unexpectedly: I was suddenly aware what an enormous avalanche of wrongs I had left behind me. Before, this reality had been masked by pride and by my wanting to look good in front of others. But now, memories of everything I had ever done wrong poured out of me like a river of bile.

All I wanted was to be free, to have nothing dark and ugly and hidden within me; I wanted to make good, wherever I could, the wrongs I had done. I had no excuses for myself – youth, circumstances, or bad peers. I was responsible for what I had done.

On one page after another I poured it all out in clear detail. I felt as though an angel of repentance was slashing at my heart with his sword, such was the pain. I wrote dozens of letters to people and organizations I had cheated, stolen from, lied to. Finally I felt truly free.²

John may be calling us a brood of vipers, but it's not meant as an insult, but as an invitation – to confess, to come clean. And to have our sin and guilt and shame washed away by the grace of God. Good News.

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,” shouts John to the crowd. And here is our second bit of good news. Not only can we come clean and be washed clean, but we can also be changed. We don't have to keep on repeating the same sins ad infinitum, repeating the same mistakes, digging ever deeper ruts through the same patterns of life that keep us stuck in sadness and sin and sorrow. We can be changed. We can be healed. We can be turned around right and set back on the right path forward. Not only are we invited to repent and be forgiven, but we are promised that our repentance can be the ticket to something better – to bearing the fruits in keeping with repentance, a life that is better and deeper and on the right track. And that, too, is good news.

Tom Long, a great preacher and long-time teacher of preachers, tells of leading a conference at Montreat one year. During a break in the conference, a bus tour had been set up for those who wanted to see the fall colors on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Long boarded the bus and took a seat next to a man who was sitting somewhat off by himself. And they got to talking. The man said to Long, *“I used to be an evangelist, you know”* – at which point Long immediately began to rethink his seat choice. The man continued:

“Yes, I preached all through these hills – little towns, small churches, tent meetings. I preached hundreds of messages. But then, one day, I realized I had been preaching the wrong thing.”

Now I was intrigued. “Preaching the wrong thing?”

“Yeah, the wrong thing. I thought that the gospel was a list of things people have to believe. You know, ‘Folks, you have to believe this and you have to believe that or God's gonna send you to hell.’ That sort of thing. But one day I was reading the Bible, trying to get up a sermon, and it hit me like a thunderstorm, that's not the gospel! The gospel doesn't say, ‘You gotta believe this and that.’ The gospel says, ‘Friends, I have some good news. Hey, we don't have to live this way anymore!’”³

“Hey, we don't have to live this way anymore!” – we can be changed, and changed for the better. That is the second bit of good news in John's preaching. The crowds, under the grace of repentance and forgiveness, turn to John and ask, *“What then shall we do?”* And John answers them – you can be different! You can live differently starting now!

And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

John tells the crowd that not only can they be forgiven through their repentance and God’s grace, but that they can be changed by the same means. Released from the prison cell of how things have always been, into the freedom of a new way of living pleasing to God and a blessing to self and to others – the fruits of repentance. Frederick Buechner again, from Wishful Thinking – defines repentance in this way:

To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying “Wow!”⁴

In other words, “*Hey, we don’t have to live this way anymore!*”. As well as “*Wow!*” – life can be different, I can be different, from now on.

But it is the last part of John’s message where we find the “goodest” of all the good news he is preaching – the great good news which makes possible everything John has said so far. The crowd gathered around John, hearing the power of his preaching, can’t help but start wondering whether or not he might actually be the Messiah. And John is quick to correct that error. “*I am not,*” he tells them in no uncertain terms. Before adding, “*But He is coming very soon!*” He is coming soon in the power of the Holy Spirit to reclaim His Kingdom. “*I baptize you with water,*” John says, “*but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” The promised redemption of all things is just about to begin, says John – for the promised Messiah of God is just about to appear. And that is the best good news of all.

And, if it was good news back then for the people of God that Jesus was just about to come – then it is even better news for us now who are waiting for Jesus to come again. To Israel, John speaks of the Messiah coming to begin His work of redemption. To us, then, in our day, John is speaking of the Messiah coming again to bring that work to its fulfillment. It’s just about to happen John tells Israel. And it will happen again, John now says to us – the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to bring to earth the Kingdom of God. Not just us, but everything made good and right again.

Gregory Jones, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, tells of a church conference he attended. The first night, as everyone gathered for the opening worship, suddenly all the lights in the auditorium went out – except for a single spotlight shining on a beautiful stained-glass window. As everyone was admiring the beauty of that window, suddenly, from offstage, a brick was thrown through that window, and it shattered it into a million pieces. The sound of the broken glass falling to the floor in that darkened auditorium was chilling. And then the lights came on, and the service began with a confession of sin, a confession of the brokenness that mars the beauty God intended for our lives, that mars the beauty God intended for our relationships with others, that mars the

beauty God intended to shine forth in all His Creation. At the end of the service, everyone was given a piece of the broken stained-glass window and told to keep it with them throughout the conference as they contemplated the brokenness in their own lives.

The last night of the conference, after the confession of sin, the ushers passed around baskets to collect the broken pieces of stained glass everyone had been carrying. The baskets of broken stained glass were then taken up to the communion table and emptied into a large metal bucket. Again, that sound of broken glass falling. As the last bucket was emptied, the lights again went out very suddenly. It was completely dark, until a single spotlight came on – shining on a large object sitting on the communion table and covered with a black cloth. As the congregation watched, the cloth was slowly lifted – revealing something breathtakingly beautiful – a large cross made out of broken pieces of stained glass. And then came the assurance of pardon⁵:

*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation.
The old has passed away; behold, the new has begun. All this is
from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself . . . For our
sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might
become the righteousness of God.*⁶

That's what John was preaching to Israel in the wilderness – that Jesus Christ was coming to begin this work of making something new and beautiful out of all the broken pieces of this world, even out of broken pieces like you and me. By the cross of His first coming, He would take up all the broken pieces into Himself upon a cross.

But what John is saying to us this morning is that when Jesus comes again, that work of redemption, restoration, recreation of all that has been broken will be revealed. And it will be – all things will be – breathtakingly beautiful for evermore. Good news!

¹ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 15.

² Johann Christoph Arnold, Why Forgive? (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2000), pp. 134-135.

³ Thomas G. Long, "When Half Spent Was the Night: Preaching Hope in the New Millenium," Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (Easter, 1999), pp. 16-17.

⁴ Buechner, p. 79.

⁵ Gregory L. Jones, "Trust," Christian Century, Vol. 114, No. 37 (December 24, 1997), p. 1232.

⁶ II Corinthians 5:17-21.