

There is Another King: Jesus *Luke – Acts*

The Voice in the Wilderness *Luke 3:1 – 20*

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Friday, January 12, 2018

Introduction: When the Mayor Was Coming

Recently, the mayor of Boston, Tom Menino, was supposed to come to our street. Over the summer, my wife Ming and I and others in our neighborhood had started a community garden on an empty lot next to our house. The mayor's office had given us a good sized grant, and now his office had set a date for him to come see the lot along with the Boston Parks commissioner.

Now you have to understand the Mayor doesn't come to our part of town that often. And perhaps the community development corporation who owns the lot and who gave us permission to build the garden thought that this was going to be a big publicity op for them: Who knows what media will come with the mayor? But I'm telling you, anticipating this one little visit from the Mayor, people went into hyper drive. The community development corporation went crazy with clean up. They powerwashed their sidewalk, they powerwashed the outside of their building. They repainted their front porch, they even repainted the parking lines in their parking lot. They cut down trees and pruned branches. They mulched, they built new paths. They sent people to clean trashy areas that have not been cleaned for years. They even sent maintenance people to clean up the trash in the house next door to them, which does not belong to them. But the thing that I was most surprised by and happy about, was the city of Boston came to completely redo the sidewalks on our street. Now some of these sidewalks have been busted up for years, maybe decades, they looked bad. And for months, we had called the mayor's hotline, friends had called the mayor's hotline, asking for the sidewalks to be fixed. But usually you call the hotline, and your request just goes into some black hole. But two days before the mayor's supposed to show up here come the backhoes and concrete mixers, voila, we have brand new sidewalks the day before the mayor's supposed to show. They even asphalted the potholes in the street. It was amazing. Now, for the rest of the story, the day the mayor was supposed to come, he sent a representative instead due to an emergency. But hey, we got new sidewalks, and a whole host of improvements that we never would have gotten if no-one had thought the mayor was going to come.

Relevance:

When Jesus comes into our lives, he changes things. He calls for change. He warns us in advance that our lives will have to change, our communities will have to change. The passage we're looking at today says, 'Make those paths straight!' Not just sidewalks for him to walk on, but the paths in our hearts, in our lives, which he will walk on to take his rightful place as King in us. Jesus wants to make an impact on your campus, in your communities, on this city. He does it by transforming our lives. Are we ready for him?

Text:

We are going to look at how God prepared people for Jesus back then. We'll look at Luke 3:1 – 20. Now the Gospel of Luke was written by Luke, who was a doctor and missionary partner to the apostle Paul. He wrote one of the four biographies of Jesus, along with Matthew, Mark, and John. Like a doctor who not only studies individual patients, but also public health, he researched not only each individual stories like Mary the mother of Jesus, but also the whole Christian movement: why Jesus is the cure for sin when all others have failed? He interviewed people who met Jesus. He studied existing Christian documents and Christian thinking. And he organized the history that is now the Gospel of Luke.

The first thing Luke does is situate us in Luke 3:1 - 3: ¹ Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.'

Now Luke has at least two reasons for doing this. Reason number one: This is real history. This is not myth, which happens who knows where, in the heavens somewhere, or in some alternate universe. This really happened in this place and at this time, when these leaders were reigning. But reason number two: These guys weren't it! It's not about them. God was not revealing Himself through those who were already powerful. He came to this weird guy who wore camel hair and ate honey and insects in the wilderness. He was the son of Zacharias, an obscure priest in Israel. This was not at Rome, the capital of the mighty Empire. This was in Israel, a small conquered country. God is flipping the script.

This is what John said, in v.3 - 6: ¹³ And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; ⁶ and all flesh will see the salvation of God.'

This quote from Isaiah is referring to many things, but 'the way of the Lord' is in your heart. 'His paths' are in your heart. Isaiah was referring to God coming to dwell inside people, and part of the preparation for that was internal. So in some sense, it's like the mayor of Boston coming to my neighborhood, and maybe even my own house. Crossover means not so much that you go from place A to place Z, but you go from being messed up, broken people to being healed, restored people. When God comes, we change. He transforms us. And this is what Isaiah calls 'the salvation of God.' Salvation is not going from earth to heaven. Salvation is not being saved from God. Salvation is being saved from our own evil and brokenness and weakness. Salvation is the reunion of heaven and earth. Because God is coming, says John the Baptist.

God Comes as Fire

And God comes as fire: ⁷ So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' ⁸ Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire**.'

Now that sounds scary. People who love the fire and brimstone love passages like this. I'm going to save v.10 - 14 for just a bit later. It's because John returns to this portrayal of God as fire in v.15 - 17: ¹⁵ Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and **fire**. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.'

Do you see how fire is connected with God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, in v.16? So at first fire seemed like destroying fire in v.9 and 17 because fire is destroys wood or chaff, which is the husks of a wheat harvest. But now fire seems like a cleansing fire, right? So is fire good for us, or bad for us?

It depends on how we receive the fire. It depends on our posture, and our attitude. Luke uses symmetry in his writings. He also wrote the book of Acts, which is about what the disciples did as Jesus empowered them with his Spirit. There is a symmetry between Luke's Gospel, which is about Jesus, and his book of Acts, which is about Jesus' disciples. One point of symmetry is the motif of fire. This is the first time fire is mentioned in Luke's Gospel. The Spirit and fire. What is the first time fire is mentioned in Acts? In Acts 2, when the Spirit comes with fire. The Spirit comes, and there appear to be flames of fire above the heads of each of the disciples. And what is happening is that the Spirit is burning sin away from people, and burning the presence of God into people. So God's fire starts off as a good thing. Like fire melting metal so it can separate the gold from the dross, the trashy worthless impurities. You could receive it with joy and gladness, because God is burning the sin away from you, with your partnership, as He speaks to you through Jesus and empowers you to obey. Or, you could remain addicted to your sin, and try to hold on to what God wants to burn away. In that case, you would be identifying yourself with your sinfulness, the dross, the trashy metals, the impurity. And God will feel like a destroying fire, instead of a refining fire.

Let me now step outside of just Luke, and look at the Bible as a whole. What is the first time in the Bible fire appears? After the fall, when God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden, because He doesn't want them to eat from the tree of life in a fallen state, because they'd make sin immortal. Human evil would be immortal. So God sends them out, and places a flaming sword outside the garden to prevent people from coming back in (Gen.3:24). That's the first time fire appears in the Bible. The idea is that if people are going to come back into the garden, God has to burn something away from us, or cut something away from us. In the book of Revelation, Jesus appears as a flaming sword. He is portrayed in Revelation 1 as burning with fire, and with a sword coming out of his mouth, because he has burned something out of his own humanity, and wants to burn it out of us. And he cuts something away from us through his teaching, through his word. So fire is good for us.

That's why God constantly describes Himself as a fire, or even appears as a fire. God showed himself as the fire in the burning bush (Ex.3:1 - 5). Then God led Israel out of Egypt as a pillar of fire. Then God came in fire on top of Mount Sinai and called Israel to come up to meet Him (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). Moses said "yes" and went up and met with God, and as a result, his face shone with light (Ex.34). God was cleansing Moses. Isaiah experienced God like a burning coal that touched his lips (ouch!!!) and purified his speech (Isa.6). Malachi said, 'He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver' (Mal.3:2 - 3). Jesus came to perfect the purification: 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Mt.3:11; Lk.3:16). He purified himself with God's presence by God's Spirit, which is why Jesus lit up with purified light on what is called the transfiguration (Mt.17:1 - 13; Lk.9:11 - 17). What happened to Moses' face happened to Jesus' whole body. And at Pentecost, which was the anniversary of Israel at Mount Sinai receiving the Law, Jesus sent his Spirit to do just that, and turned each of his disciples into a mini-Mount Sinai complete with fire on top: 'And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.' (Acts 2:3). Paul said God's refining fire will test the quality of his ministry: 'Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.' (1 Cor.3:12 - 15). And in the book of Revelation, God's people are portrayed as the New Jerusalem as pure gold, like clear glass (Rev.21:18, 21). Pure gold is not transparent. It is not like clear glass. So the emphasis is on the purified state of the gold, like the purified state of the glass. (See also Isa.29:6; 30:27 - 30; Ezk.22:17 - 22; Ps.29:7; 50:3; Neh.9:12; Heb.12:29. For more information on these New Testament passages on fire and darkness, as well as the Old Testament's treatment of these motifs, see my paper, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel*. See my paper, *Hell Is the Love of God*, for the early Christian view that even hell is the love of God, the purifying fire of God, experienced by people who don't want to be purified! Both papers are found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire)

Illus: On one occasion, when I was in worship at a church service, I felt the burning touch of God. My heart, my chest, felt warm. The song we were singing was, 'Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here...' And I think I was wrestling with something, but the important thing that I remember vividly is feeling like Jesus had placed his finger on my chest.

So whether you receive God's purifying fire as joy or torment depends on you. Do you want to be purified? Do you want to see God's salvation as salvation from your sin? Or will you resist God, identify with your sin, and therefore feel like God is destroying *you* per se?

Therefore, What is Repentance? v.10 - 14

Well, that's the question that people wanted to ask John the Baptist. So in v.10 - 14, he spells it out. This is what repentance looks like. Let's start with your money.

¹⁰ And the **crowds** were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?' ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.'

¹² And some **tax collectors** also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' ¹³ And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.'

¹⁴ Some **soldiers** were questioning him, saying, ‘And what about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.’

This is what it looks like to prepare to meet Jesus, prepare for his kingdom, and prepare for his presence in your life. Three categories of people get very specific instructions that exemplifies what Jesus will continue teaching. This is a sketch, and Jesus will fill it out.

The Crowds: v.10 - 11

The crowds are the general Jewish audience. To them, John reminds them to be generous. Sharing. Give clothing. Give food. There was probably more he said, but this is what Luke gives us. This is how you practically care about people. Your attitude towards money expresses your attitude towards other people and yourself.

Now I want to be sure that we get the fact that John the Baptist is telling this to people who don't know Jesus yet. In other words, he's doing evangelism. He's telling this to non-Christians. Can you do social justice work, and call people to Jesus from that? Yes!

Illus: Global Poverty Impact

The Tax Collectors: v.12 - 13

The tax collectors are Jews who collected taxes for the Roman government. Rome was the European power; they made a colony of this Middle Eastern people. Why? For taxes. These unwanted conquerors sucked tax money from all over the Mediterranean world, including Israel, into Rome. Jewish tax collectors worked for the oppressors, for the system. The way tax collectors made money for themselves is by charging something over and above the taxes. Rome didn't care what they charged. They just backed these guys up. So tax collectors were hated by their own people. They were the sell outs.

So for tax collectors to do what John, and later Jesus, said means that they weren't making a salary. Instead of profiting from the system, tax collectors would have to absorb part of the injustice themselves. Now I'm always surprised when I read this, because whether I admit it or not, the Christian culture we have in the U.S. is Puritanical, so it's about my personal piety. I keep thinking the words on the page of my Bible are going to change: "John the Baptist told them to get out of that job. No compromise!" But if they did that, then what would happen? Someone else would take their place. And then they would do the tax extortion thing. And the community will suffer in the same way. So John the Baptist and Jesus told tax collectors to stay in their job and make *nothing for themselves*. At least that cut out the extra portion that Jewish people had to pay that wasn't tax but extortion from the tax collectors. Tax collectors would have to be fairly poor, and/or work a second job, and/or depend on the Jewish community for support, and most importantly, trust *God* for support. Maybe one day the Roman Empire would end. But until then, this was what Jesus declared for people who lived and worked as tax collectors.

Don't ever let anyone tell you that the New Testament doesn't understand structural injustice, because they are so personal. Jesus and the New Testament writers totally understand structural injustice. They are personal because persons live in structures.

Illus: Housing.

First of all, it means that Zaccheus has started to receive Jesus as shalom, so he wants to spread that shalom. He says, ‘I don't want the name of Jesus to be dishonored because of me. Let me make reparations as much as I can. I'm happy to do that!’ He honored the Jewish law, which said that thieves had to repay 2 to 5 times as much as they had stolen. Zaccheus says that he's going to repay 4 times, so it's on the side of honoring that more rather than less.

The Soldiers: v.14

Your supervisor, your commanding officer, gave orders to extort money from the conquered people. Well you need to put God first. And if you can't stand up to your supervisor, when he contradicts God, well then maybe you're not as strong as you thought.

Illus: In the late 1700's, Jesus brought shalom to William Wilberforce, who had been a rich kid, and spoiled partier, who ran for political office and became a minister in the British Parliament. But he realized he didn't know God or

God's love, and didn't have a purpose to his life. But Jesus opened his eyes. So Wilberforce advocated for the poor English factory workers, and then African men and women who had been enslaved. He was part of a team and led a political campaign for forty years to end the slave trade and slavery. He inherited injustice in the British Empire, and he repaid the injustice with his life. He succeeded just before he died. The entire British Empire abolished slavery. Too bad the American colonies had rebelled a few years too early.

Illus: my mom disowned me