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Luke 3:1–20

4th Message

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# THE GATEWAY TO A NEW WORLD

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

For the past several years I have developed a friendship with Nerses Balabanian who is the pastor of the Armenian Congregation Church in San Francisco. Nerses grew up in the ancient city of Aleppo, Syria. He came to the U.S. to study music and theology and then went back to the Middle East and served the Lord as a pastor, school principal and musician for two decades. Last fall we attended a conference sponsored by EMEU (Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding) discussing the impact the “Arab spring” was having on the church in the Middle East. Several speakers gave voice to the fact that, though the current regimes were indeed corrupt and tyrannical, there was order and Christians had rights. What truly frightened them was what would happen after a revolution and who would fill the vacuum. For Nerses it became personal as insurgents took their stand in Aleppo and the government responded with massive artillery bombardments. The neighborhood where Nerses grew up was leveled by a car bomb. In the midst of the bloodshed and chaos no one feels safe, and hundreds of thousands of Aleppo’s citizens have fled the city, including Nerses’ family.

Does the Good News we serve have anything to say in a world like this? Today Luke is going to take us on a journey to the desert to meet a prophet who has just such a message. If Luke wanted to introduce us to the ministry of John the Baptist today, we wouldn’t read about it in back of the religious section of the newspaper. Luke would place a photo of John with an appropriate headline on the front page of the New York Times as the top story in World News. Next to his photo would be a map of the Middle East detailing all the hot spots of seething hatred and warring factions that have exploded into bloodshed. Above the map the headline would read: ISRAELI PROPHET ANNOUNCES NEW KING! NATIONS BEWARE.

## I. The Backdrop of John’s Ministry (Luke 3:1-6)

### A. The Political Backdrop: Oppression and opposition (vv. 1-2)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (Luke 3:1-2 ESV)

Seven rulers, who represent the powerful political muscle of the day, provide the backdrop for John’s ministry. Each name is laden with layers of misery, corruption and oppression of God’s people. Tiberius was hated by the Jews for their deportation from Rome. During his final years as emperor, he lost his mind and ruled by sheer terror.

Pilate, prefect of the Roman province of Judea, is known from Jewish sources as “inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness,” whose administration was marked by briberies, insults, robberies, outrages, wanton injuries, frequent executions without trial, and endless savage ferocity...Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and

Perea, over-stepped Jewish sensibilities by constructing his new capital city, Tiberias, on a graveyard, and placing images in public places.<sup>1</sup>

Annas, who served as high priest until 15 C.E., still exerted his sinister influence over the temple through his son-in-law Caiaphas.

Into that climate of corrupt power and opposition to all that was right and true we hear, “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” To a faithful Jew, who kept his or her dreams alive by the prophetic promises, those words would sound the bell of freedom! “The word of the Lord came to...” is reminiscent of numerous prophetic texts that introduced a prophet’s ministry in the context of what were often wicked and corrupt rulers who were about to be annihilated if they did not repent. In the words of Isaiah, mighty nations were “a drop in the bucket,” “dust on the scales,” “nothing” and “less than nothing” (Isa 40:15, 17); but “the word of our God endures forever” (Isa 40:8).

Now after centuries of silence the all-powerful, creative word of God has come to John in the wilderness. The wilderness was laden with sacred memories of the Exodus and the birth of the people of God, a time characterized by the simplicity of devotion and dependence on God. The wilderness was where Israel’s prophets had said that God would some day come and revive his people with a new covenant and lead them in a new and greater Exodus – one that would not only rescue his people from oppression, but also set the whole world right. “The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together” (Isa 40:5). John’s appearance in the wilderness signaled that this was the climactic moment of Israel’s history.

### B. The Prophetic Backdrop: The hope a new age (vv. 3-6)

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (vv. 3-6)

To prepare the nation for the arrival of their King, John preached on the necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, for the people were in sorry shape. The book of Deuteronomy spoke of such repentance (*shuv*) that would end Israel’s exile and open the door to a new age.

So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has driven

you, and you **return** (*shuv*) to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and soul...then the LORD your God will **restore** (*shav*) **you from captivity** (*shevut*)...Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.” (Deut 30:1-3, 6 NASB)

Tom Wright calls this “eschatological repentance.” This was what Israel must do if her exile was to come to an end, inaugurating the Messianic Age. To demonstrate their repentance John asks them to do something very strange. He doesn’t ask them to take up arms against Rome, like the zealots; or to intensify their efforts at keeping the law, like the Pharisees. Rather he asks them to enter a watery grave: to be baptized. This was an odd thing to ask of a Jew, for baptism was an initiation rite for proselytes who wanted to become Jews. To ask a Jew to be baptized implied that their birthright no longer counted for anything. Baptism was an assault on the status quo; it meant starting over, a radical re-alignment to God’s ways and purposes.

This is why Isaiah uses larger-than-life metaphors of leveling mountains and filling deep canyons to create a superhighway in the desert. A brand new beginning, a New Creation was required. Ezekiel described it as a second birth, one of water and spirit (Ezek. 36:24-27) that would transport God’s people through their final exodus into the Messianic age, an age where “all flesh would see the salvation of God.”

Even more radical than the act of baptism was the gift of forgiveness that John was offering Israel. This gift was being offered outside Jerusalem, far away from the temple, the sacrificial system and the priests. People could receive it out in the desert. John did not come to reform Judaism; he was announcing a new age that was the goal of her history. It would be a time when all the shadows of Israel’s religion would give way to wonderful realities. No longer would worship be mediated in terms of holy places and symbols, but as Jesus said, from now on all “true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23).

If you had gone out into the desert to follow John, you would be placing all your bets that this was the time of which the prophets had spoken. There would be no second chance. All your bridges to the past would be burned; there was no going back. But seeing these gigantic earthmovers go to work, the vision of a new superhighway upon which you will meet Israel’s true king shoots adrenalin through your veins. Like a little leaguer who runs into the locker room expecting welcoming cheers from his new coach, you sprint to join the long line of baptismal candidates. But then comes the shock...

## II. John’s Teaching: Repentance (Luke 3:7-14)

### A. The Necessity of Repentance (vv. 7-9)

**He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** (vv. 7-9)

John’s opening words – “You brood of vipers!” are shocking and sound nothing like the “good news” we were expecting. One would think that John would greet these travel-weary pilgrims with open

arms and grateful hugs after their long and difficult journey. Anyone who has ever travelled in Israel knows first hand how oppressive the desert can be to those who traverse its borders. So why the scathing denunciation?

Matthew tells us that John was addressing his comments to representatives of the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come, most likely not to be baptized, but to keep a close eye on what John was doing and teaching. Prophets have a way of seeing beneath the surface to the thoughts and intentions of the heart. John exposes their faulty assumptions before the entire crowd and demands that they give proof of their repentance. But Luke doesn’t let us off the hook. He leaves the audience anonymous, forcing the reader to feel the full weight of his words.

As the Lord’s great highway builder, John confronts the biggest obstacle that stands in the way of repentance. Much to our surprise it is not immorality, blasphemy, thievery or murder. It is religious complacency – relying on your birthright, upbringing, or privileged status as a guarantee that you have a claim in the age to come. John turns the tables on such thinking. With scathing sarcasm, he compares those who take pride in their status to snakes that leave their hiding places and come out in the open when a brush fire flares up in the desert. “Sons of Abraham? No, you are sons of snakes, poisonous and hostile to all that is life!” To the insightful, John is exposing their true father, the devil. If you find John’s words harsh, you’ll find Jesus’ just as disturbing, for he will have no tolerance for holy hypocrites (Matt 12:34, 23:1-39; John 8:44).

The evidence of a relationship with God has nothing to do with one’s ancestry, for God can create “sons” (Heb. *ben*) from stones (Heb. *eben*), an echo of Isa 51:1b-2:

**Look to the rock from which you were hewn,  
and to the quarry from which you were dug.  
Look to Abraham your father  
and to Sarah who bore you;  
for he was but one when I called him,  
that I might bless him and multiply him.**

John’s message conveys hope as well as rebuke, giving voice to God’s intent to create a new people who will produce the fruit of holy character, not just from among the Jews, but also from the Gentiles, a people whose lives were as lifeless and hopeless as the stone gods they worshipped. Thus the people must bear fruits in keeping with their repentance. Ritual without reality is meaningless.

With urgency in his voice, John presses the people to make a decision. The time to act is now (“even now”); divine judgment is imminent. This window of opportunity will not remain open forever. “The axe is laid at the root of the trees” and every tree that does not bear fruit will be thrown into the fire (Isa 10:33-34; Mal 4:1). Looking back we can see how God, in his incredible long-suffering and patience, extended that window of opportunity for 40 years. But when it ended, it shut with severity. Jesus called the pangs of desolation that befell Jerusalem “a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will” (Matt 24:21).

### B. The Fruit of Repentance (vv. 10-14)

**And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” 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.” (vv. 10-14)**

John’s urgency provokes the crowd to respond, “What then shall we do? The question “what then should we do” is repeated a number of times throughout the gospel and “demonstrates in an explicit way that the redemptive visitation of God demands response.”<sup>2</sup> You cannot remain neutral.

What is surprising are the ones who emerge from the crowd – tax collectors, who were despised for exploiting the tax system for their own financial gain; and soldiers (probably Jews in the military service of Herod), who could easily use their position of power to extort money from the weak and powerless. What would John say would be appropriate means of repentance that would spare them from the coming judgment?

John’s swift, straightforward answers are so different than the mass of ethical minutia given by the rabbis. When the house is on fire, there’s little time for lengthy discussions; you must quickly prioritize what is essential and act decisively. Like most of the prophets, John was concerned that the rich were getting richer and the poor getting poorer. If God is going to rule your life, you must radically change your orientation and be willing to address the injustices that disadvantage others around you. Do you have two sleeping bags? Give one away. Is your pantry full? Take half of it to City Team. Are you a loan officer? Be an advocate to help the poor to renegotiate their loans. Are you an attorney? Don’t take advantage of someone’s tragedy to get rich. Are you a narcotics officer? Keep your hands off the drug money. Are you a CEO? Share your stock options with the bottom rung of your employees.

This is not merely an injunctive for social justice. This is a radical recognition that what God values lies in direct opposition to the priorities and hierarchies of the world, and that we will live out what we most truly believe about God and his kingdom. As Tom Wright suggests, these are “simple clear commands; but if they were obeyed they would demonstrate that people meant business. None of these things happens by chance; they only occur when people have genuinely repented of the small-scale injustices which turn a society sour.”<sup>3</sup>

### III. Prophet or King? (Luke 3:15-17)

**As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (vv. 15-17)**

John’s Spirit-filled words struck such a cord of truth in the heart of the people that they began to wonder if he was indeed the promised king to come. Sensing their questions, John set the record straight. There was to be no confusion between his role and the One who was to come. One of the tasks of a prophet in the Old Testament was to anoint kings. No king in Israel ever ruled without prophetic sanction. David and Saul had their Samuel, Solomon his Nathan, etc. So John has come as the last in the long line of prophets. He would be the one to anoint Israel’s final king. But what is new, says

John, is that this coming King is in a different league than anyone who has come before. So much “stronger” than John is this one that he feels unworthy even to untie the thong of his sandals, something that was the work of slaves.

For all of John’s greatness, all he was doing was opening the gateway to the new age, but Jesus actually bestows the eschatological gift of the Spirit, which imparts the life of the age to come. The anointing that was reserved for prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament will now be given to every believer without measure (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Pet 2:9-10; 1 John 2:27). This will be heaven’s great invasion into every corner of planet earth.

The additional mention of “fire” can be taken in one of two ways. It could be an additional reference to the Spirit, which not only empowers, but also purifies and cleanses from sin. In support of this view is Luke’s description of “tongues as of fire” (Acts 2:3) that appeared on the apostles when the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. The other possibility is that Jesus administers two baptisms, one with the Spirit and the other with fire. You get to pick which one you want to receive. This reading is supported by the immediate context with its description of the impending judgment with “unquenchable fire.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, in Luke 12:49 Jesus says, “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” Both views reflect the truth and Luke may have wanted to preserve the ambiguity, but I prefer the second. The image of the King with his hand of the threshing fork, ready to cast the wheat in to the barn, heightens the immediacy of judgment, while “unquenchable fire” raises the stakes by turning up the heat.

### IV. Our Destiny? (Luke 3:18-20)

**So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. (vv. 18-20)**

Luke ends this section on an ominous note. The fact that John was heralding a new king would not have gone well with Herod Antipas. Though he was a “tetrarch” and not a king, he had hoped through his rebuilding of the temple to someday inherit his father’s title as “King of the Jews.” It all came to a head when John censured Herod for his incestuous adultery with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. After the affair Herodias divorced her husband (something unheard of in Jewish law) and married Herod. John’s condemnation was not simply a moral criticism, but a direct challenge to his right to be king.<sup>5</sup> John would not abide by our rules of separation of church and state. A leader’s private life has everything to do with his right to rule. And that goes for business leaders as well as politicians.

Luke spares us the details of Herod’s wicked exploits, perhaps because they were public knowledge, or more importantly to temper our expectations of how God’s kingdom advances in a hostile world. If we were expecting that God was going to set the world right by exercising his strong arm against unjust rulers, John’s fate shatters that view. What we find in John is a godly prophet who fearlessly speaks the truth, but the king still bears the sword. God allows the righteous to suffer. And so it will be his Messiah, Jesus. “The sufferings of the Messiah are not only the means by which we ourselves are rescued from our sin. They are the means, when extended through the life of his people, by which the world itself may be brought to a new place.”<sup>6</sup>

Baptism was radical both in what it promised and what it required. It promised that the new age was about to dawn, an age of forgiveness that would transcend the Judaism of old and a new exodus to carry God's people into the messianic age. These are absolutely revolutionary promises. But what was required was equally as demanding. Baptism demanded public admission of one's depravity and the renunciation of any special status that Judaism afforded as well as the legal protection that was provided under Roman law. One who was baptized could not go back. He would be considered an outcast to his family and a threat to the political powers. During the short reign of Pontius Pilate's procuratorship (A.D. 26-36), we know of at least seven incidents when the Romans crushed Jewish movements that had any semblance of revolution about them.

Knowing all this, would you have gone to the wilderness? Would you have paid the price? Would you have gone into that watery grave? Baptism still remains the rite of initiation into the kingdom of God. The act itself does not save us. Baptism is the public wedding ceremony of believers with the One who bought us, a ceremony that brings him the honor he deserves. The only difference today is that rather than anticipating the new age, baptism celebrates the new age as being already fulfilled. As we descend into the water we identify with Christ in his death, and as we ascend, we celebrate being raised with him to newness of life – a life that confronts the injustices in the world wherever we find it, and reaches out with whatever we have in forgiveness, love and healing.

As the violence rages in Aleppo insurgents invade neighborhoods, climb to the rooftops and take aim at government forces, fire their weapons then disappear into hiding. The homes with their innocent occupants then become targets for government retaliation. Recently a Muslim neighborhood was targeted. After the insurgents left, the homeowners were terrified of retaliation. An Armenian pastor

reached out and offered his neighbors safe refuge in his church. Back in California, Nerses and his wife Sevan opened their small home to help a family from Syria get back on their feet after they fled the country. Their daughter Nanor, a graduate student at Stanford, has requested to do her student teaching in Lebanon, not just to fulfill her academic requirements, but having been raised in Lebanon during the civil war, she is eager to go back to look for ways to help Lebanese orphans and Syrian refugees. These mustard seeds of love and life will bear fruit and prosper long after the kingdoms of this earth have been consumed in the unquenchable fire.

1. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 168-69.
2. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 177.
3. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 35.
4. "Unquenchable" (Grk. *asbestos*) is rare term found only three times in the New Testament (Matt 3:12; Mark 9:43; Luke 3:17). Fire was the most powerful destructive force known in the ancient world, and the New Testament use of *asbestos* implies utter and complete destruction of whatever is rejected by God as unsuitable or unworthy." R. K. Harrison, "*asbestos*," NIDNTT, 3:III.
5. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 36-37.
6. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 71.

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