



## WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

December 16, 2018, Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-20

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

Luke 3 begins with an impressive listing of all the power brokers of the day. Their collective wealth and control covers it all: the political, military, economic, social and even religious spheres. He names the emperor, the governor, three tetrarchs, and the Temple high priests. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this group the “definers of reality”—those who determine how life goes for the rest of us.<sup>1</sup> Verse 1 makes for a long opening sentence structure, with six commas needed to account for them and all the power they have amassed.

But there is one more phrase before the sentence concludes with a decisive period, a full stop. After all of those impressive “definers of reality,” there is a comma, then this: “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

And it is that last phrase that changes the power dynamics at play; that changes everything. For all of the political, military, economic and priestly weight being thrown around, comes now the word of God. It reminds me of the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of Martin Luther’s towering hymn in which we sing:

“And though this world with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
his rage we can endure, For lo! his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.”

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



One little word, you see, if it is the word of God, has the power to overcome all lesser words that are used to define us and maintain the settled and secured world as it is currently arranged. Now notice to whom this word of God comes: to John son of Zechariah. Now notice where the word of God appears: not in the halls of power nor in the courts of the wealthy nor in the sanctuary of the righteous, but in the wilderness...at the margins.

I have often apologized for the significant Advent airtime given over to John the Baptist, that unwelcome roadblock on the way to Christmas. His “Brood of vipers!” certainly takes the “Happy” out of the holiday. It doesn’t help that Matthew and Mark add to his eccentricity by noting his odd clothes and diet—camel hair cloak, leather belt, locusts dipped in honey. Really, he is not the sort of fellow you want to end up talking to at the co-op Christmas party.

Upon closer examination, though, Luke presents John a bit differently. Luke lets us get to know his mother and his daddy in that endearing story we heard last week. And Luke chooses to make no mention of his clothing style or food preferences. Yes, there is still that “Brood of vipers!” comment and, yes, John is still determined that we be washed in repentance and the forgiveness of sins. But Luke is the only Gospel that records a sermon John preached. How people flocked to hear him because they felt like he knew them somehow—how they struggled to do the right thing in an unfair system...how to be generous to others when you had to worry about yourself and your own family, too. It seems to me, from Luke’s version anyway, that they saw John as someone who would give it to them straight. He would help them get a clearer idea of what they should do in order to become the person they wanted most to be.

Fred Craddock once told about a time in his life, a couple of years after he had been baptized, when he knew he needed to go talk to his pastor about something personal. It was hard, he said, but he knew he needed to do it. You see, he and some fellows he worked with in a box factory had gone uptown to get a hotdog for lunch one day. They all still had on their nail aprons—they drove nails to make the boxes—when they passed a blind man on the sidewalk with his guitar. A sign that



said, “I’m blind. Please help me,” and a tin cup were taped to the neck of his guitar. It suddenly occurred to the three of them to play a trick. Each of them took some nails from their aprons and dropped them noisily into his tin cup. The man said, “Thank you, thank you very much. May God bless you. Thank you very much.”

“That began to eat at me,” Fred said. “Of all the ugly, terrible things to do. Well, I couldn’t get rid of it, so finally I did what some people only do in desperation; I talked to the minister. I went to the minister and told him what I had done, and he sat up at his desk and said, “Are you aware that this country is in the biggest war of our history?” It was World War II, the last year of it. “People are dying by the hundreds every day; soldiers have been away from their families for years. We don’t know how this whole thing is going, people dying, starving. And you are worried about nails in a blind man’s cup?”

He let me go, Craddock said. “My little problem was swallowed up in the problems of the world, but it wouldn’t go away.” Craddock continues: “Finally, I went to the youth minister, Mignonne. We didn’t pay her, but she was a minister. I told her what I had done, and she told me that was a terrible, terrible thing to do. She felt bad, like I felt bad, and she said, ‘God forgives you for that, but why don’t you go to that same blind man and tell him what you did and ask him to forgive you, and then if you have a nickel or a dime or a quarter, give it to him.’ I did, and that poor man forgave me, and he smiled and said, “I know how it is. Lots of boys are full of mischief, aren’t they?” He forgave me. I had been baptized already, and I was carrying that around. Now that may not seem big to you,” Craddock concludes, “but think about what you’re carrying around right now. Would you like to get rid of it?”<sup>ii</sup>

That’s essentially what John was offering...he asked people what they were carrying around that was weighing them down, holding them back, keeping them stuck, making them less than they were created to be. He told them the way God wants the world to be and the way God wants them to live their lives so the world might look different and so might they. Burdened people flocked to him. People



who needed to forgive themselves or someone else. They came asking, “What should we do?” Crowds of them asked, “What should we do?” John said, “Share your extra coat and your extra food.” “What should we do?” the tax collectors asked next...those people who made a living by collecting money for the bloated empire and then exacted a little more because, hey...we’ve got to get by, too, don’t we? John put it to them plain: “Collect only what is authorized...don’t line your pockets at the expense of someone else, especially people afraid of you or oppressed by the system.” Next came the soldiers. In spite of the loyalty oath they took to the emperor and the governor; in spite of their fancy uniforms and shiny medals and weapons, they asked, too, “And we, what should we do?” “Don’t abuse your power...stop threatening people and making false charges against them.”

Brueggemann describes the world of John’s day, which is our world as well. They lived, he writes, in a world organized against graciousness. A world where “the powerful not only preside over institutions and plan budgets and deploy people. They determine the language which will be spoken and the values which will be embraced. They decree what constitutes humanity and who will be included in or declared out.” The world, Brueggemann notes, “ordered by Tiberius and his cohort is essentially a graceless world...a *quid pro quo* world in which people pay for what they do, get what they have coming to them, and are not bailed out.”<sup>iii</sup>

The word of God came to John and he in turn spoke that truth to powerful and common people alike. John understood that in a world organized against graciousness, everyone is carrying around a burden that weighs on us, holds us back...something we can’t forgive ourselves for or can’t forgive in someone else. He knew that every single one of us is caught up in a system that is unjust; a system where everyone suffers to some degree, but a lot of people are made to suffer more than the rest of us. John offered the ethical alternatives of God, that we might live graciously in a world organized against graciousness.

John came to prepare the way for the One who was coming after him. He wanted us to be ready and he had a sense of urgency about it; as if he couldn’t bear for the world to go on like it was one second longer. John knew that to change the ways of



the world, we must change the ways within ourselves. In the little things as well as in the great big matters before us.

Russell Levenson, Jr. is the Episcopal priest who was pastor to the Bush family in Houston. Just after President Bush died and before the funeral, Levenson spoke with Michel Martin on NPR. She said: “I was wondering what role faith played in President Bush’s life...” Levenson responded, “...he was a committed Episcopalian. And we live our faith both in words and actions. ...He was committed to the church, to God, to the Christian faith...” Michel Martin then asked what the President did at the church...how he put his faith in action there. Levenson replied, “Well, they were members for 50 years... He was an usher. He served coffee on Sunday mornings. ...[He was] called on for leadership. And I think we had a bring-a-friend-to-church Sunday, and he brought Margaret Thatcher as his friend.”<sup>iv</sup>

I think about President Bush and President Carter, contemporaries who both were one-term Presidents but who, from their position of power, had the opportunity to be “definers of reality” for our nation and for the world, too. And I think about how their faith instructed their actions in the Oval Office and in the fellowship hall. They did not always get it right, of course, no one of us ever gets it all right. I think of them weighing decisions about war and peace and budgets and bills being shaped in some measure by George Bush handing out bulletins and showing someone to a seat of welcome and pouring coffee, and Jimmy Carter teaching Sunday School every Sunday as he still does and wearing his apron full of nails as he hammers together a Habitat home... Toward the end of his sermon at National Cathedral, Levenson reflected: “Some have said this is the end of an era...” He paused and said, “but it does not have to be...perhaps it is an invitation...”

On this third Sunday of Advent, John issues an urgent invitation from the wilderness. It is the invitation to live differently in a world organized against graciousness. The invitation to be washed in repentance and forgiveness of sins. It is the invitation to get ready now because a more powerful Word is coming, the Word made flesh, whose demands are even greater and more urgent still.



From his throne in Galilee, Herod saw exactly how dangerous John's word in the wilderness could be for the settled powers of this world. So our text ends by telling us that Herod shut up John in prison.

It didn't work, of course. In the end, it will never work. Because if it is from God, well, one little word...

*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Expository Article on Luke 3:1-6 in **Interpretation**, 1976 (404-409).

<sup>ii</sup> Fred B. Craddock, **Craddock Stories**, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 101-102.

<sup>iii</sup> Brueggemann, 405.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/01/672598376/bush-family-pastor-speaks-on-his-friendship-with-president-george-h-w-bush>