



Luke 3:1-22

“The Beginning Of Revival” (9th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 3:1-22 "THE BEGINNING OF REVIVAL"

1) vv.1-6 HEROD, JOHN'S BAPTISM, AND SCRIPTURE.

11 FACTORS IN REVIVAL

POWER POLITICS

Urban Elite! Who Has Influence? Who Matters?

a) vv.1-2a Seven Political And Religious Players.

(L), 1:5, 2:1, REAL POLITICAL & RELIGIOUS SETTING (1)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, 18 Year Jump, 28-29 A.D. and HEROD being TETRARCH of Galilee, Antipas, Deposed/Banished 39A.D., Ruler Of A Fourth Part and his BROTHER Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, d. 34A.D, Undistinguished and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene, (2) in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, Both Out Of Office By 37A.D.

b) vv.2b-6 John's Baptism, Quote From Isaiah 40:3-5.

Social Turmoil, PREPARED PREACHER (2)

The word of God came to JOHN, the SON of Zechariah in the wilderness; Contrast! 1:76-80, Jer. 1, Divine Revelation and he went out into ALL THE REGION about the Jordan, preaching a BAPTISM of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

Bypass Temple Cult, SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENT (3)

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

1:76, 7:26-27, Exodus Echoes, The End-Time Prophet

Prepare the way of the Lord,/ make his paths straight.//

Mt. 3:2, Our Job, Image: Straight Paths

Every valley shall be filled,/ and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,//

Images: High/Low

and the crooked shall be made straight,/ and the rough ways shall be made smooth,//

Images: Crooked/Smooth

and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God."

2:32, Ezek. 36:25-26, The Promise (Lk. 2:32)

2) vv.7-9 JOHN'S MESSAGE: FRUITFUL REPENTANCE AND FIRE OF JUDGMENT.

He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him,

(Q) Mt. 3:7-10, Large Responses

a "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Is. 13:9, 59:5 GOD'S WRATH (4)

Bear fruits that befit repentance,

Conversion, All Life Before God TURN AROUND = REPENTANCE (5)

b and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father';

Inherited Religion

b' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Contra Jews, Is. 51:1-2

a' Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree;

Rom. 2:6-8, Not Cedars Of Lebanon, But Israel

every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 6:43-45, 13:6-9, 20:9-18

MONEY

3) vv.10-14 JOHN ANSWERS QUESTIONS: \$.

Acts 2:37 COUNSEL/ SOCIAL JUSTICE (6)

a And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?"

(L), Hearts Are Stirred! Multitudes:

And he said, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none;

Compassion

And he who has food, let him do likewise."

1 Tim. 6:8

b Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

Tax Collectors:

And he said, "Collect no more than is appointed you?"

19:1-10, No Extortion

c Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?"

Jewish Soldiers Protect Toll Stations:

And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or false accusation,

Shock System, No Plunder

and be content with your wages."

Justice + Compassion = What It Means To Bear Fruit

God's Presence Reveals And Judges

2') vv.15-18 JOHN'S PREACHING: END-TIME SAVIOR AND FIRE OF JUDGMENT.

a As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John,

//Mt. 3:11-12

whether perhaps he was the Christ, John answered them all,

b1-2 "I baptize you with water;/ but he who is mightier than I is coming,//

Ezek. 36:26-27, PREACHING JESUS (7)

2'-1' the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie,// he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire./

b' His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary,

but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Mt. 3:12, Psalm 1 Acts 2:1ff.

a' So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.

4:18,43; 7:22, How Is This Good News?

1') vv.19-22 HEROD, JOHN'S ARREST, JESUS' BAPTISM, AND SCRIPTURAL VOICE.

SEX

a) vv.19-20 Political Players And John's Imprisonment.

Summary, BIBLICAL SEXUAL ETHICS (8)

But HEROD the TETRARCH, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his BROTHER'S wife,

Half-brother

and for all the evil things that Herod had done, (20) added all this to them, that he shut up JOHN in prison.

PRICE (9)

Empowered For Kingdom Ministry, Spiritual Battle

b) vv.21-22 Jesus' Baptism, Isaiah 42:1, 61:1 (Beloved Servant).

PRESENCE: JESUS CHRIST (10)

Now when ALL THE PEOPLE were BAPTIZED, and when Jesus had been baptized and was praying,

Vision/Audition

the heaven was opened, (22) and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove,

Portent, SPIRIT (11)

and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved SON; with thee I am well pleased." 1:35, 4:16-21, Ps. 2:7, Is. 42:1

GOD

LUKE 1:1-4:15

"THE PRE-PUBLIC AND EARLY CAREERS OF JOHN AND JESUS IN PARALLEL"

I. 1:1-4 RHETORICAL PREFACE OF AN ANCIENT BIOS: LAYERS OF TRADITION.

II. THE PARALLEL STORIES OF CONCEPTION, BIRTH, EARLY SERVICE.

A. 1:5-25 Annunciation To Zechariah

1. vv.5-7 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status _____
2. vv.8-23 Annunciation By Gabriel

- a. vv.8-10 Zechariah's Service/ People Outside
 - b. vv.11-20 Appearance, Message, Sign _____
 1. v.11 Angel appears
 2. v.12 Fearful response
 3. v.14 Angelic message (4 phrases)
 4. vv.14-17 Gabriel's song proclaims John's significance
 5. v.18 Zechariah's objection
 6. v.19 Angel's response/authority
v.20 "And behold," sign of dumbness
 7. v.23 Departure
- a' vv.21-23 People outside/ Zechariah's service

A' 1:26-38 Annunciation To Mary

1. vv.26-27 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status
2. vv.28-37 Annunciation By Gabriel

- a. (No Parallel)
 - b. vv.28-37 Appearance, Message, Sign
 1. v.28 Angel appears
 2. v.29 Fearful response
 3. vv.30-31 Angelic message (4 phrases)
 4. vv.32-33 Gabriel's song proclaims Jesus' significance
 5. v.34 Mary's objection
 6. v.35 Angel's response/ Spirit's authority
vv.36-37, "And behold," sign of Elizabeth
 7. v.38 Departure
- a' v.38 Promise fulfilled, Mary's response

B. 1:39-56 Visitation Of Mary & Elizabeth.

1. vv.39-40 Mary's Arrival And Greeting
 2. vv.41-45 John's Response, Elizabeth's Song To Mary
 - 2' vv.46-55 Mary's Song To God In Two Stanzas
- 1' v.56 Mary's Stay And Departure

C. 1:57-80 Birth And Destiny Of John

- John As Prophet (1:16-17, 1:76, 3:1-6)
1. (cf. 1:5 Herod)
John at home
 2. v.57 Birth of John
 3. v.58 Neighbors, Kinfolk Rejoice
 4. vv.59-66 Circumcision, Naming of John
 5. vv.67-79 Priestly prophecy concerning John at his presentation
 6. v.80a Growth of John
v.80b John in the wilderness

C' 2:1-52 Birth And Destiny Of Jesus

- Jesus As Messiah/Son (1:21-33, 1:69; 1:35, 2:49)
1. vv.1-5 Historical Dating: *Caesar, Quirinius*
Holy family to Bethlehem
 2. vv.6-7 Birth of Jesus
 3. vv.8-20 Angels appear to shepherds who go and rejoice with Mary
 4. v.21 Circumcision, Naming of Jesus
 5. vv.22-39 Priestly Prophecy Concerning Jesus at his presentation
 6. v.40 Growth of Jesus
vv.41-51 Jesus in the temple
v.52 Growth of Jesus

D. 3:1-22 Beginning Of John's Ministry

1. 3:2b John as "Son of Zechariah"
2. 3:2b John in the "wilderness"
3. 3:8 Abraham reference
4. 3:7-18 John's preaches Isaiah's good news"
5. 3:19-20 John rejected by Herod unacceptable prophet

D' 3:23-4:15 Beginning Of Jesus' Ministry

1. 3:23-38 Jesus as "son of Joseph," "son of God"
2. 4:1-15 Jesus in the "wilderness" "if you are Son"
3. 3:34 Abraham reference
4. 4:16-30 Jesus' preaches Isaiah's, "good news," Joseph's son?"
5. 4:28-29 Jesus rejected by Nazareth unacceptable prophet

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 3:1-22

An argument can be made that Luke's portrayal of John and Jesus in parallel panels does not end with 2:52 but continues through 4:30. Each ends with a rejection, John by Herod (3:19) and Jesus at Nazareth (4:28-29). We have tended to frame Luke 1-2 as the *Infancy Narrative* and miss the fact that just as the prenatal John and Jesus come together in 1:39-56 with signs and wonders focused on Jesus, so the two young men come together again in the baptismal scene with signs and wonders focused on Jesus.

The structure is a 5:1 concentric pattern with vv.10-14 at the center: 1ab-2-3-2'-1'ab. Seven terms in vv.1-3 (*Herod, Tetrarch, brother // brother's, John, son, all the region // all the people, baptism// baptized*) are found in vv.19-22. The inclusion is clear; Luke intended 3:1-22 as a thought unit. At the center in 3. vv.10-14 are three groups that ask the same question, *What then shall we do?* On either side in 2 // 2' are samples of John's preaching which contain the catchword *fire*. *Money* (vv.10-14), *Sex* (v.19), and *Power* (vv.1-2a) collide with the coming kingdom of God. John preaches repentance (vv.7-9) and points to Jesus (v.15-18). His words and suffering mark him as a prophet and model evangelist.

At several places Luke highlights the reigning pyramid of power (1:5, 2:1, 3:1-2a). He starts with Tiberias Caesar in Rome, moves to the current prefect of Judea- Pontius Pilate, covers three Jewish client rulers- Herod, Philip, Lysanius- then turns to the dynasty of high priests in Jerusalem- Annas and Caiphas. Three of these (Pilate, Herod, Caiphas) are involved in the events of Jesus' death. Luke is honest about real world power at all levels. These all pass away, but today John and Jesus are celebrated around the world. *Do not mistake power for influence* is Luke's commentary on the way the world is currently run.

Desert preparation comes to an end when God speaks, "The word of God came to John..." He then travels the Jordan valley calling his people to come clean with God and receive a river baptism with a view to forgiveness. Nothing is said about Jerusalem temple rituals which have not produced a repentant people. Isaiah 40:3-5 is the banner over John's new work. The coming Lord is Jesus, and we must get ready! The arrival of such a one calls for a major public works project: straight roads, no potholes or bumps allowed! Crank up the dozers! John prepares the people to prepare for the great reception, the day when *all flesh shall see the salvation of our God*. That glorious end determines the present response.

John's imagery is grounded in long wilderness reflection. When brush fires come to the desert, vipers slither away as dry vegetation explodes in wind-swept flames. This uncomplimentary image greeted the first hearers whom John labeled *offspring of the snake*, the devil's own brood. There was no place to escape God's coming judgments. One thing mattered, and it was not Jewish religious heritage as false comfort; it was recognizing the moment and turning one's whole life in God's direction. Only a changed life in response to God's call would bear up when the court was convened. That John's hammer cracked hard hearts is evident by the repeated question of vv.10-14, *What then shall we do?* John here shifts from denunciation to exhortation, from diagnosis to prescription. There is nothing here of personal piety. Repentance means changing the way I see people in need and people over whom I have power. Love and treat them fairly: this is what it means to prepare for God's holy and purging presence.

John is clear he is not the coming mighty one. His baptism is water symbolism; the real deal is to be engulfed in the wind and fire of God's Holy Spirit. John is removed to jail because he criticized the incestuous practices of Herod. That day Jesus was last in line. After his baptism and during prayer, he received a visual and auditory revelation. He was empowered by the Spirit and confirmed as beloved Son in words from Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1. The dove was a cultural symbol of God's beneficence. Keep reading!

THE BEGINNING OF REVIVAL

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

With no tact, John the Baptist began his sermon!

L U K E 3 : 1 8

Once upon a time a weary traveler, having lost his way, wandered a dark forest and a steep path. From nowhere, there appeared out of the mists a strong castle and outside a servant waving his way. He felt great relief.

On approaching the gate he looked back and saw a strange sight. Other travelers trudged past as if the castle wasn't there. He asked the servant to explain the perplexing behavior and was given this reply:

“A magic castle this is, only seen only by those who admit they're lost. We do not appear to those who pretend to know where they are going. Humility is sight. You may enter the castle; its riches are now yours.”¹

This tale preserves two truths. Knowing you are lost is the start of being found, and pride blinds. A third is this: between admitting you are lost and entering the castle is a great spiritual, moral and intellectual struggle, a fierce battle for the soul. The trail is infested with brigands, and round the castle a great moat of snakes and gators. It's only a short fable; it can't tell us everything.

When one person- responding to the convicting work of the Spirit- becomes aware they are lost in life and turns to Jesus for rescue, we call it *conversion*.² Life changes because

¹ Edited, B. Cavanaugh, *The Sower's Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 26-27.

² On conversion, see Scott McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2002); Scot McKnight & Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories Of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco TX: Baylor, 2008); Ron Crandall, *Contagious Faith: Exploring Christian Conversion* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1999); John Tyson, Kenneth Collins, editors, *Conversion in*

of the multiple benefits he gladly gives: forgiveness and a healed relationship with the Triune God, new intellectual and spiritual resources, a new community, a mission as big as the world and a deep sense of meaning. When the work of illumination spreads in a church so that many of God’s people see how far they have fallen from their first love, we call it an *awakening* as people are roused from spiritual sleep and the stupor of their habitual sins to see Christ anew in all his majesty. Ho-hum becomes Hallelujah! When it moves outside the church so people are made aware of their spiritual poverty and respond to God’s kindness with new attitudes towards power, money, and sex as part of turning to Christ, we call it *revival*. Self is dethroned with its attending idols; Christ rules from the center of the heart. God comes to do business *up close* and *with new intensity*, not just to save individuals or rehabilitate a church- important as these are, but change a culture. In a speech in 1989- now 24 years ago- Billy Graham gave a diagnosis:

“We've lost sight of the fact that some things are always right and some always wrong. We've lost our reference point. We don't have any moral philosophy to undergird our way of life in this country, and our way of life is in serious jeopardy and serious danger unless something happens. *And that something must be a spiritual revival.*”³

In 1801 in Cane Ridge, Kentucky there was such a visitation. James Finley, a Methodist, gives this eyewitness:

“At Cane Ridge in 1801, 20,000 arrived for a six-day camp meeting. The noise was like Niagara. The vast sea of human beings seemed to be moved upon as if by a storm. Some were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy in the most piteous accents, others shouting most vociferously. My knees trembled; my lips quivered; I felt as though I must fall to the ground. A strong supernatural power pervaded the entire mass of people.... At one time I saw at least five hundred swept down in a moment as if a battery of a thousand guns had opened upon them and then... shrieks and shouts to the very Heavens.”⁴

Divine visitations also work along different paths of entry. In her book on Christianity and the arts- aptly title *Saving Leonardo*- Nancy Pearcey reports some parts of Japan are

the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2001).

³ *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, No. 9, April 4, 1989.

⁴ Edited from Joy Dawson, “Lord, This Isn’t What I Expected,” *Pray*, Issue Four, January/ February 1998, 27.

responding to an unlikely evangelist- Johann Sebastian Bach. One journalist claims, "A veritable Bach boom has been sweeping the country the past 16 years." His *Christmas Oratorio* during Advent and *St. Matthew Passion* during Lent are always sold out, even though tickets are over \$600. The beauty of Bach's music and gospel lyrics are leading people to Christ. A Japanese Christian conductor said:

“Bach works as a missionary among our people. After each concert, people crowd the podium wishing to talk to me about topics that are normally taboo in our society- death, for example. Then they inevitably ask me what *hope* means to Christians. I believe Bach has already converted tens of thousands of Japanese to the Christian faith.”

One musicologist traveled from Japan to Bach's church in Germany to study the biblical basis of his cantatas. He ended up seeking out a pastor, "It is not enough to read Christian texts. I want to be a Christian myself. Please baptize me." A female organist and former Buddhist said, "Bach introduced me to God, Jesus, and Christianity. When I play a fugue, I can hear Bach talking to God."⁵ When beauty and truth come together, God's voice is heard. People ask, "What must I do?" to which the answer is, "Turn with all you are to Jesus Christ. He will remove the blockages and restore you to God; then learn what his compassion and justice mean. Join his movement, read his book, love his people, expect opposition.”

What is revival? "*Revival is arrival,*" says Stephen Hawthorne, "it is Christ showing up in a powerful new way to significantly overthrow the status quo and establish the claims of His kingdom afresh." J. Edwin Orr writes of the battle, "Revival is *war* between the Spirit and the Devil."⁶ Two historians write, "Revival is *God's invasion* into the lives of one or more of His people in order to awaken them spiritually for Kingdom ministry."⁷ Awakening and revival are something God does when the church loses its way; a hunger develops to seek God in prayer because of the sense of God's absence. We are participants in such preparation, but the deep renewal is something only God brings, often with surprises not found in church bulletins. So we may spot it when it comes and not resist in ignorance, I invite your attention to a classic passage on divine visitation. Spiritual awakenings have lengthy preparation before the outbreak, and if sustained, change a culture.

THE SETTING AND APPEARANCE OF JOHN (vv.1-6)

⁵ Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2010), 267-268.

⁶ David Bryant, "What Are You Praying Towards," *Pray*, Issue 4, Jan./Feb., 12.

⁷ Malcolm McDow, Alvin L. Reid, *Firefall: How God Has Shaped History Through Revivals* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 1997), 7.

“In the fifth year of Obama’s presidency, Graham being Senator and Haley governor of South Carolina, with Welborn Adams mayor, Jonathan Holston Bishop and James Friday Superintendent, the word of God came to Pastor Phil in the dry wastelands of Greenwood, and he went into the pulpit announcing a massive change in landscape: now is the time for crooked lives to straighten out; now is the time for the broken and low to be lifted up in restoration; now is the time for the uppity- the proud and independent- to be brought back to the reality of compassion; those who are rough as cobs are to be sanded smooth so nothing blocks the sight of King Jesus.⁸ Isaiah’s ancient promises start again today! “All flesh shall see the salvation of our God!”

Now that’s a bit overblown for two reasons. I’m no John the Baptist, and secondly our list of leaders is dotted with Christians. But the fact remains that many of us have never been near a spiritual awakening, not some humanly-manufactured frothy substitute but the weighty presence of the holy God of love pressing in on his people for a fresh response. I have been through two waves in forty years, first *the Jesus movement* of the early 70's; it changed the face of my campus and supplied the church a new crop of pastors, and secondly *the charismatic movement* and its offshoots which restored the array of spiritual gifts and a fresh expectation for the supernatural. Perhaps a new wave is on the way, God breathing fresh life and power and holiness and courage into his tattered people. We need it; I need it!

All I have done is change the names in Luke’s roster of descending political and ecclesiastical power from *then to now* and from *there to here*. He begins with “Hail To The Chief,” then moves down the ladder from Caesar and Pilate through three Jewish client kings before jumping to the temple and the high priests Anna and Caiphas. Why so much detail about rulers? Because this bunch, this entire interconnected web of power and violence and prestige was arrayed against God’s purposes. Remember the rest of the story: Herod hassled Jesus and murdered John the Baptist because he named his sexual sins in public; Pontius Pilate signed Jesus’ death warrant because his boss Tiberias gave him capital authority; Annas and Caiphas conspired in the plot by turning Jesus over. John was beheaded and Jesus strung up; the last prophet and the only Son were executed. Worldly power is impressive; it brings a certain order through violence and control, but it is not to be equated with God’s rule. God has a different government in mind, a new kingdom. The challenge of God coming this close was disturbing to current arrangements, so shut John up and do Jesus in. Revival will not come from Washington or Nashville or Columbia. Renewal is most often not top-down or center-out but from around the edges, in unlikely places, and always arouses resistance. John alone in the barren Judean wilderness for years, perhaps decades, waiting

⁸ This paragraph is recast from the insights of the church fathers in Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke: Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament, Vol. III*, (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), 56-68.

on a word from God to be released. What if God wanted to do it here? 211 North Main. To awaken us to the beauty of faithful living and the glory of Jesus Christ. You know, the big brick church with a rich past that's looking for a new future. When revival comes, it always has a political and a religious context because when God comes to clean up and reclaim his people it has implications for all of life. It was not to any of the seven leaders here listed that *the word of God came*, only to John in the desert. Which is more impressive? One who rules, or one who hears from God?⁹

Revivals can be dated. This one was 28 to 29 A.D., a brief window. Life was going along, power structures in control, then God spoke, and with that word John began to travel and preach, verse 3: "...and he went out into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John was a one man invasion; he preached bluntly, used water as a symbol, and offered fellow Jews a fresh start with their God. No PR campaign, just a hard, hopeful word. Baptism was something Gentiles went through when they became Jews.¹⁰ John is treating fellow Jews as if they were pagans carrying around heavy loads of idolatry and immorality and greed because they were. Our United Methodist churches are full of people with second hand religion who need to be re-evangelized. To say "I'm a good Methodist" means little today. Baptized, institutionalized, sacramentalized, ritualized, but with little awareness of sin or the call to follow Christ, unaware of the corrupting influence of culture on our lives because we've been going with the flow so long. Revival is not first for the lost world but a lost church! God's people need a fresh visitation, starting with the preachers, starting with me!

When the reality of that indictment cuts our calloused hearts, it's a sign of grace preparing us for a visitation. "Get ready," says John, "Do what Isaiah said long ago. Get out the earth-movers. Fill the valleys, level the mountains, straighten out the crooked, make the rough smooth. Create a grand highway for God's arrival. "And all flesh shall see the salvation of our God." Revival is not vague. Verses 1 through 6 tell us that it has a time, a location, a political and religious context, a catalytic messenger and a call for action. It starts with God speaking and those who hear being obedient in a way that brings attention to God's promises. And it calls us to do something, to change what we can in cooperation with God's grace.

⁹ See T.M. Luhrmann, "My Take: if you hear God speak audibly, you (usually) aren't crazy," for a fresh take on divine speaking by a psychological anthropologist, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/29>.

¹⁰ For a review of proselyte baptism, see Ben Witherington, *Troubled Waters: Rethinking The Theology Of Baptism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2007).

A man once came to Gipsy Smith- the celebrated English evangelist of an earlier era- and asked how to have revival.

Smith responded, “Do you have a place to pray?”

“Yes,” the man replied.

“Tell you what to do; go to that place and take a piece of chalk. Kneel down and draw a circle all around you. Pray for God to send revival to everything inside the circle. Stay there until He answers, and you will have revival.”¹¹ A box of chalk is available at the altar rail today. Pick up a piece. Let me know what happens.

JOHN’S PREACHING AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION (vv.7-18)

The next four marks are found in verses 7 through 18. People in our day often make fun of what they call *hellfire and brimstone* preaching, and it is to be made fun of if it is a tool of manipulation by a preacher. But if issued with the same clarity and concern as the doctor who holds up an X-ray and warns the smoker about cancer, the alcoholic about cirrhosis, or the obese about heart disease, it is to be heeded. An angry harangue is not the same as a clear diagnosis. You want your doc to tell the truth; why not your pastor? Since we often don’t because it makes people mad and messes up career plans, God raises up prophets like John to remedy our cowardice.

Who will tell people the truth in love and with tears? Who will tell them their sins are weighing them down to hell? Who will tell them the Living God is to be feared and obeyed? Who will tell them God’s grace is the power the change from greed to compassion and from misusing power to guarding the common good? Who will tell them if they show no signs of new life in Christ that having their name on a Methodist Church roll is no protection at all? Who will tell them it doesn’t matter if their dear mother or father was a believer if they are not? Inherited religion is wonderful legacy but a false hope unless you build on it with personal faith.

Fifteen years ago I looked a woman in the eye who had participated in hundreds of abortions as a clinic worker for Planned Parenthood and told her she was a mass-murderer. She told me she went into the business to justify her own abortion, her reasoning being- in her own words, “If I’ve done it privately, then I must support it publicly.” They liked her logic and hired her. She sobbed as she told me and a female staff member about counting little body parts on the surgical tray to make sure they got them all. Like pieces of a broken puzzle she reassembled them. Three hundred times, she said. We cried with her, but calling her actions by the proper name was the only hope of her getting rid of the awful weight of

¹¹ Michael Green, editor, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 305-306.

guilt and fear that was leaching the very life out of her body through anorexia and depression and lupus and cancer. She looked awful, though only in her mid-thirties, using all the resources of medicine but still in a steep decline.

And idea came to mind. I took an icon of Jesus off my wall and placed it in her lap as the Orthodox sometimes do for confession. My friend sat facing her. I stood behind with a hand on her shoulder as she recounted the horror of her actions to Jesus, not to me, to him. As a pastor I then had the privilege of announcing to her his full forgiveness- just as I do to you most Sundays, and beyond forgiveness his cleansing her from the defilement of evil she had contracted. She dedicated her body to God from head to toe, and I asked the Holy Spirit to fill her inner vacuum with his healing presence. The next day she looked different, still ill, but the lights were back on. The weight was gone, the long process of restoration begun. Here’s the sad part. She was a student in a United Methodist seminary, had been heavily involved in the occult, and in none of her studies or local church had anyone addressed the issues in her life. I will never forget that afternoon. It was the day I understood something of the power of Jesus’ sacrificial blood to wash away all sin, the really ugly stuff. When she returned to the state from which she came, I called ahead and referred her to a Vineyard pastor.¹² I frankly did not trust the church from which she’d come.

It’s not that John was not a sinner like those who came to the Jordan, only that God called him to tell the truth about the sorry state of God’s people and offer a remedy. When I speak plainly about God’s law and wrath, I do not do so from a position of moral superiority but with an awareness I am a physician of souls and must deliver an accurate diagnosis. It’s when people leave that I get on my face and tremble, “God, save me from the disease I see in them.” Who will do this work in our age of political correctness, hyper-tolerance, psycho-babble, cheap grace and moral compromise? Have we forgotten sin kills people? That evil attaches itself like a disease-bearing tick who is never filled.

You think it was easy for John to look across a sea of Jewish faces and begin his sermon with an attack? “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” When fire crackled the bone-dry brush of the Judean desert, vipers slithered out their dens and fled for safety. It’s a good and not a bad thing to fear God and feel his heat. Because John’s own heart had been laid bare in the solitude of the wilderness, he could easily spot the pious deceptions of those who came to him, and he settled for nothing less than a true turn-around and first-hand religion. Imagine what it was like for him to hear people unburden their consciences standing there in the river? Vomiting out their sins? An eight-hour shift in a Roman Catholic confessional would make us wonder how priests bear up.

¹² On the remarkable history of this denomination and its founder- John Wimber, see Bill Jackson, *The Quest For The Radical Middle* (Cape Town, SA: VIP, 1999).

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Like them, John became expert in the labyrinthine ways of the heart and the easy deception of half-confessions. It was *come clean* or *go home!* John was unshockable.

Saint Augustine wrote, “He who beats his heart, but does not mend his ways, does not remove his sins but hardens them.”¹³ Pain over sin, unless it leads to deep change in heart and habit, only hardens us, making true repentance harder the next time. Sorrow is a good beginning, but not enough. The only proof of the life of God in the soul is a changed life of new passions. Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Augustine’s mentor, wrote, “True repentance is to cease from sin.” “Bear fruits,” said John, “and quit hiding behind you ancestor Abraham. Being a Jew by birth is not enough.”

Forty-years ago at Wake Forest during the heyday of the campus Jesus movement, a friend- Jim Morgan- wrote a song that mocks what John mocked, which is the notion that church is a safe place to hide from God:

“I spend money that says, ‘In God we trust.’
You know I’ve got to be saved.
I tip my hat to the ladies I meet on the bus,
You know I’ve got to be saved.
I’ve been tithing since I was two, and always went to Sunday School,
and followed the golden rule.
Can’t remember when I last sinned, so stop this talk about being ‘born again.’
You know I’ve got to be saved.
There are windows in church that bear my name,
You know I’ve got to be saved.
Well the organs, pews, and pulpit, they do the same,
You know I’ve got to be saved.
I get down on my knees to pray. I read the Bible every day.
And though you think my pride would grow,
I’m the humblest person that I know.
You know I’ve got to be saved.”

What is it, I ask you, about middle-class, southern, middle-of-the road church culture that so insulates people against the Living God? In my darker moments I sometimes wonder if God has set us adrift without a rudder until the pain or embarrassment gets so great we finally cry to heaven for help. There was a stirring in the desert. God was drawing people through a prophet who knew his own heart well enough not to be fooled by religious

¹³ I.D.E. Thomas, *The Golden Treasury of Patristic Quotations* (Oklahoma City, OK: Hearthstone Publishing, 1996), 221.

displays. And when the lights came on and they saw themselves exposed before God, John gave practical counsel.

You should always distrust a minister who will preach *at* you, even *to* you, but not talk *with* you or give practical help. A biblical evangelist does more than preach; they listen and give guidance. We used to all it *altar-work*; it was that blend of prayer and counsel that awakened sinners received when they came forward to kneel and pray. We've lost that art. People are too proud to come forward, and the preachers inexperienced with people seeking God. If revival comes, this art must be recovered.

At some point people under conviction have *to do something*. The burden of conscience is unbearable, and they are ready for real change. Each of the three groups asks the same question, "What then shall we do? Tell us what to do, John! Tell us how to starting walk towards God." While John's counsel is fitted to each audience (the masses, the tax men and soldiers), what ties it together is the theme of money, power and possessions. Coming to know God changes my relationship to stuff. It opens my heart in compassion to the poor. I give them one of my garments so we each have one. Knowing God gives you new eyes for people you ignore. The quickest single way to revive a lagging faith is to find a needy person and help them. Not anonymous charity through the church but personally with an offer of friendship. Not a project but a person. Go find one and obey Jesus!

Tax collectors and soldiers John called to fairness and integrity. They were not to use power to shake others down, as was their habit. John would tell business types not to pad expense accounts and for teachers not to give up on difficult kids; he'd tell the wealthy to double tithe (ten percent to the church, ten percent to missions); he'd tell workers to do the job for God and not engage in workplace gossip; he's counsel lawyers to take more *pro bono* work for the poor and physicians to volunteer at a free clinic; he'd tell car dealers to be honest in all transactions and not to rip off the naive. He tell some to leave dishonorable occupations, and to preachers he'd say, "God is more severe and more merciful than any congregation."

Revival is not just about stirred-up emotions- though that happens as God dredges a life and grips a heart; it's about change. About compassion for the poor, about financial integrity, about the restoration of public trust among officials. So if it doesn't change the way I relate to the poor and whatever goods I have, it's not revival but an imitation. When revival comes there is the preaching of God's righteous demands and certain wrath; there is repentance and a stripping away of religious excuses; there's personal guidance and a changed attitude towards money; and there is, finally, a clear focus on Jesus Christ. When compared with the crowds, John looked good. When compared with the One who was to come, he was less than a shoe-shine boy and knew it. John used water as a symbol; Jesus would plunge people in the fiery wind of God's holy presence.

There are many tests for revival, but one above all. Is Jesus lifted up? Is he freely offered as the way back to God? Does the preacher- like John- *point the way*, or are they *in the way*? I am not a good man. Some of you think differently because my office offers me abundant chances to do good- and I am grateful, but I know differently; I live with me. But I have a great Savior. And I want him to sift through my life, blow away or burn away all that is lightweight and sorry and cheap and ugly and sinful and trashy and evil and low and mean and self-serving and petty and small and stupid. If it can't get past the gate of the kingdom, may as well deal with it now.

Near-Eastern farmers cut ripe wheat and bind it in bundles. They then pound it so grain and husk separate from the stalk. Finally they let the wind do the work, and if no wind is blowing, use large fans to create a breeze. The mixture of wheat and husk is repeatedly thrown into the air with a winnowing fork. The wind blows away the lighter husk; heavier grain drops back onto the sheet. Husks are burned for fuel; grain is stored for food. This of the windy Spirit of God. It blows, and where it blows, there is a separation. Husk is labeled husk, and grain is labeled grain.

To walk with Christ is a lifetime of sifting. While he preached to others, John was sifted. My conscience hurts while I preach, and if you see me sometimes pause with a stunned look, something fresh has come to mind that applies more to me than you. The old word for this long process is *sanctification*, which is the gradual separation of us from our sins- outward and inward, intentional and ignorant- so we become holy as the character of Christ is worked into us. God is utterly committed to the process because it's the only way to save us; we must be reconfigured. We bear the fruit of his good works, and we go through a never-ending purification because of who we are and where we currently live. This is good news. God has come to save us to the uttermost, and if we put our trust in Jesus, he carries us through the painful, joyful process and makes us new people who serve his purposes. One day God will tell the truth about each and reveal what we have become by our response or lack thereof to his invitation. For some that will not be pleasant. . To use John's orchard imagery, "every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire," or his harvest metaphor, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." An unfruitful life, a lightweight life, is disposed of.¹⁴ God has a trash can.

THE PRICE AND THE PURPOSE (vv.19-22)

People tolerate preachers talking about most anything, as long as they stay away from two

¹⁴ United Methodist doctrine is clear, though ignored at just this point, "The Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and the Future State, 'We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, *both now and in the last day*. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation'" (*BOD 2013: 71*).

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topics, both of which are modern idols and alternative deities: money and sex, and John talked about both in public, naming names. King Herod seduced his brother Philip's wife on a trip to Rome and later married her. She was also his niece.¹⁵ Adultery, incest, and a bunch of other evil things. John could not be silent when a supposed king of the Jews falls below pagan morality. He spoke truth to power and got himself locked away in a fortress on the Dead Sea. A pole dancer asked for his head at a stag party and got it. John would rather die than comprise God's standards for sexual morality, which remains- if you want a pithy summary- *celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage*.¹⁶ Too many of our own people are living by emotions and passions rather than by biblical convictions about what is good and holy and life-giving. The church is full of low living, and God judge those who mock his standards for the use of our bodies. They grow increasingly incapable of fidelity and promise-keeping, always on the hunt; life is reduced to urges, and people, whether in person or on a computer screen, are seen as disposable. There's nothing casual or sophisticated here; immorality has consequences. People are not automobiles; you don't get to test drive them and trade up every few years. People are made in God's image, and if you ignore or deface that image, guess what? It's not good.

Powerful people do not like private sins exposed. Herod had power to silence John by locking him up. Ordinary people silence the voice of God in drug and alcohol addictions, compulsive work, intellectual justifications, telling themselves *I deserve it*, mocking the church and its pastors, scalding their consciences with grosser and grosser sins. Being used of God as a spark plug for revival is no guarantee of safety. John Wesley was frequently attacked by rowdy mobs. Had Herod repented, the grace of God would have come to him; he might have been remembered as a rare leader who supported God's prophets rather than kill them. A second after his last heartbeat Herod said to himself, "Uh oh, I should have listened. John was not my enemy but my last hope. God sent him, and I killed him. Woe is me!" If the checkbooks and bedrooms of the church are not touched by revival, if our private and public lives do not change, the world has every right to ignore us, as is currently happening. People have freedom to deaden their consciences, freedom to oppose God's messengers, freedom to defy God's law, freedom to defile themselves, freedom to consign themselves to the alien kingdom with Herod and company, "And the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." "Oh," says everyone these days when some celebrity dies, "Why, they've gone to a better place." Don't be so sure.

¹⁵ For the details see William Barclay, *Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 35-36.

¹⁶ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2012*, Para. 2702 (a), 776.

I am gloriously expendable, change in God’s pocket to be spent as he chooses. Were I to die today, the bishop would send a replacement in a week. Books packed up and carted off, and the church would go on. The church is not dependent on me; I am dependent on the church. I do not carry the church; the church carries me. John came and went, a brief glorious revival, a true servant of God. There is only One who is not expendable, only one we cannot do without, and that is Jesus Christ, God’s only Son in whom he is perfectly pleased. Preachers and prophets come and go, revivals wax and wane like tides, and in the midst of it all Jesus Christ stands as the focus of all God’s work in the world. Revival is about him and the Spirit he pours out on the church. There’s nothing in our lives or this church more of Jesus can’t cure. You know that revival has come when his presence is felt, and he is honored and obeyed.

Lori and I visited our friend Pat Griffin in Columbia. I was once her husband Billy’s assistant baseball coach. Billy dropped dead of a brain hemorrhage. I did his funeral, then scattered his ashes on his beloved Citadel parade ground, which is something I do not recommend on a windy day! “Well,” I thought to myself, “there goes Billy in a cloud of dust!” I could tell Pat wanted to tell us something. She told how she and her two sons- Josh and Hugh- all had separately experiences of Billy coming to them in a dream. In his dream first-born Hugh asked his dad, “What is Jesus like?” Billy’s answer was simply this, “He is beautiful.” It was silent in the room. Hugh filled up with tears and he hurried off to work. Something inside me said *Yes, he is beautiful*. The Father said so after his baptism, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.” The dove symbolized that for ancient readers.

CONCLUSION

Nothing is more important than that we understand how much God has for the church that we have not yet experienced. I hunger for the day God visits his church again in power and we see some of the same phenomena as John the Baptist saw, as Wesley saw, as happened at Cane Ridge and other hot spots in church history. Changed lives, new compassion, new integrity, fresh devotion to Jesus. I can point to it, teach on it, pray for it; I just can’t make it happen. Not in my bag of tricks. It’s God’s work. In the awakening that came to Saskatoon Canada in 1971, each sermon ended with the same question, “What is God pointing a finger at in your life?”¹⁷ What is it?

¹⁷ Neil Anderson, Elmer Towns, *Rivers of Revival* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997), 158.
