

# **Sermon: How Jesus' Ministry Began (John the Baptist)**

**Text: Luke 3:1-20**

Gary L. Wackler

April 19, 2009

**Introduction:** Almost thirty years ago (before today's text) there had been a long-awaited birth come about for the aged priest, Zecharias, and his previously barren wife, Elizabeth. God performed a miracle and blessed the righteous couple with a son. After some difficulty the boy was named, John. An angel of the Lord had said:

**Luke 1:14-17 (NIV)** <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. <sup>16</sup>Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

From John the Baptist's birth until our text in Luke 3 there had been a number of changes in the political and religious lay of the land.

**Luke 3:1-2a (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,

The more popular Caesar Augustus had been succeeded by Tiberias. Pontius Pilate, who would later be involved with Jesus' crucifixion, was settling into his new post. The area that was once controlled by Herod the Great had been quartered up and given to weaker rulers.

And now after about 400 years of God appearing to go silent with his people, the Lord God Almighty elects to communicate not with the elite religious leaders, but an obscure desert prophet. Luke does not even tell us about John the Baptist's odd way of dressing or his unusual diet of locusts and wild honey (**Mark 1:6; Matthew 3:4**).

It seems that all of a sudden, John the Baptist burst on the scene. And he received:

**I. The Word of the Lord (vv. 2b-3).**

It was very common to hear “The word of the LORD came to \_\_\_\_\_” throughout the Old Testament. It was said about Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Isaiah and many other prophets.

**Luke 3:2b-3 (NIV)** <sup>2</sup><sub>b</sub> the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Some of us from Wednesday night Bible Study should find the location of God's revelation to John at least familiar. It was:

A. in the desert (v. 2b).

It is in the desert that Moses and John are called by God to be his prophet. It is to the desert that God wants his people to go and worship him. It is where there is to be a sacrifice offered. John will later call Jesus, the Lamb of God. The desert is a place of decision and faith. The desert is both a place of grumbling and where God gives his words to his prophet for the people. The desert was a place where God supplied food for his people. Now he was giving them eternal food, words of life, the Bread of Life. It is from the desert God will lead his people to the promised land.

Craddock says: "The desert is not, however, simply a place designation; it recalls Israel's formation as God's covenant people and hence implies a return to God." - *Luke*, p. 47

John the Baptist was given this word of the Lord:

B. in order to preach (v. 3).

If you are not using God's word to preach and proclaim the good news, faith is impossible. One might help people to become "positive thinkers," but they will not become children of God.

John was preaching a message of preparation for the coming Messiah. John's successors would preach for decisions about salvation.

John's message was simple: repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sin, and get ready for the coming Messiah and his kingdom. John's message was one of preparation, not salvation. Jesus, the Messiah was coming!

Even today there are two classes of people: the repentant and the unrepentant, the saved and those who are not. Repentance literally means a change of mind. It is a change of direction, both in a positive and negative sense. It is walking away from evil and toward God.

This is more than being sorry or regretful although that may be a part of it. B. H. Carroll has said correctly: No matter how much one may desire to repent, nor how often he may resolve to repent, unless he actually repents - he is lost, because God has made repentance a prerequisite to eternal life." - *An interpretation of the English Bible. The Four Gospels. Vol. 1*

John received:

## II. His Commission (vv. 4-14).

**Luke 3:4-6 (NIV)** <sup>4</sup>As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God’s salvation.””

### A. to tell of the coming Messiah (vv. 4-6).

The prophet Isaiah, nearly eight centuries before, had perfectly predicted John’s coming as the forerunner for the Messiah.

All this talk of preparing paths, ways, and roads was actually done when royalty and dignitaries were coming. Here the King is coming indeed.

John’s preaching was making a way for the Messiah to be both recognized and accepted by those who had willing, repentant hearts.

### B. to warn the crowds (vv. 7-9).

**Luke 3:7-9 (NIV)** <sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup>The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

It is like what Robert Frost tells us: “A prophet’s quarrel with the world is deep-down a lover’s quarrel. If they didn’t love the world, they probably wouldn’t bother to tell it that its going to hell. They’d just let it go. Their quarrel is God’s quarrel.”

- Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 91

I am sure John did not mean that everyone coming out to hear him were snakes. Even Jesus would have friends and followers from the Pharisees. Simon, the Pharisee, would honor Jesus with a banquet (**Luke 7:37**), others would warn Jesus of threats against his life by Herod (**Luke 13:31**). Nicodemus was a seeker (**John 3**) who with Joseph of Arimathea would provide for Jesus’ burial later.

Like any group, though, pointed-preaching can be deflected by saying: “I sure hope *they* were listening today, or it’s too bad *so and so* wasn’t here to hear this!”

Sometimes a harsh tone or difficult-to-hear message is needed. It helps get a person’s attention.

**Illus.** Have you ever had to use what is called bondo or filler-putty to patch a hole? What is normally called for when preparing the surface? Maybe sandpaper, right? You have to use a rough grit sandpaper or abrasive to get anything to stick. John may be simply trying to “prepare the surface” so something he says will stick.

Just like today, in any audience, there are those who do not think the preacher is talking to them. John was very serious because there was no time to talk in easily misunderstood language.

John received his commission:

C. to teach moral/ethical standards for disciples (vv. 10-14).

**Luke 3:10-14 (NIV)** <sup>10</sup>“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. <sup>11</sup>John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” <sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. <sup>14</sup>Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

**“What should we do then?”** This is a common question from the audiences who hear the Gospel. Jesus wants to make clear to his listeners that to come into the Kingdom there will be examples of a repentant heart: a person will think about and react to other people’s needs (food and shelter), a person needs to be fair and honest in dealing with others especially those in weaker or vulnerable positions.

Baptism is seen as a continuation of repentance and will be shown in a change both in character and motivation.

“We’re challenged by John precisely because we are good people from whom more should be expected, more must be demanded, and he will not allow us to hide behind those comparisons which water down our call to genuine and deep holiness of life.”

- Bausch, William J., *Telling Stories, Compelling Stories*, p. 35

What is surprising in John’s preaching is his audience and who accepts the message and who doesn’t. The more rotten and depraved people become, the greater the risk people will compare themselves to a mass-murderer and think that heaven is theirs. The Pharisees and Sadducees thought it was their right to be “the Chosen.” They had the pedigree and the family tree to prove their relationship with God. But, if you listen, it is not the crazies, the perverted, and refuse of society to whom John speaks in a strong way. It is the church-going people that catch it!

John received:

### III. A Different Ministry (vv. 15-18).

**Luke 3:15-18 (NIV)** <sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. <sup>16</sup>John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” <sup>18</sup>And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

#### A. in position (Master-servant).

Even though there was a high-degree of expectancy when it came to a Messiah, John squelched any ideas that he was the one for whom they were looking.

John knew he was only a servant. That is what he meant when he said: **the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie**. Even the job of a slave was too elevated of a position in relationship with his Lord. He felt privileged to introduce the people to their Messiah and then fade into the background. The message John was bringing was about the King and his kingdom. Jesus is the only one who is worthy of honor and worship.

Sometimes high-profile preachers can take on a god-like persona, but it is the true person of God who can get out of the way giving honor where it is due. John tried his best to direct people to Jesus, but in Scriptures nearly 20 years later we still see disciples of John who had not yet made the switch (**Acts 19**).

#### B. in power (recipient-Giver).

There is a huge difference between those who receive life as a gift and the One Who gives it. Jesus’ ministry would be full of the miraculous and would culminate in His resurrection. John was going to die a martyr’s death. Jesus is going to die and be raised from the dead by the power of God to live and reign forever. This difference in power between the two ministries would be acutely seen in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This gift would be given to every one of Jesus’ followers.

John could accuse and warn, but with Jesus comes salvation and judgment!

The idea of Spirit and fire is tied to judgment and its utter destructive nature. The word “spirit” can also be rendered wind, breath. It is the wind that separates wheat from chaff. The wheat is retained; the chaff is destroyed. It does not take a bible scholar to understand the serious nature of deciding to follow Jesus.

It is clear from our text alone a separation is going to take place and that the fire is “unquenchable” (everlasting).

John received a different ministry...

C. in perspective (temporary-eternal).

John’s importance would wain. Jesus’ popularity was rising. John’s disciples were becoming Jesus’ followers.

What John was offering was limited in time and scope until Jesus arrived on the scene. When Jesus, the Messiah, would come the offer was not to be introductory, but permanent and eternal.

Jesus’ plan to redeem all of mankind was not a stopgap measure. This would be the only offer God would ever make.

**Conclusion:** The cost of following Jesus and obeying God may be great indeed.

**Luke 3:19-20 (NIV)** <sup>19</sup>But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup>Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

After this John would be beheaded (**Matthew 14:3-12**) because he spoke the truth for God. We live in a world that demands tolerance, but in areas of morals and ethics the Church dares not keep silent. We need to speak in love, but speak loudly and clearly, nonetheless - just like John.

Even though John and Jesus’ ministries were different in scope and purpose, one aspect is still needed: repentance.

**I Corinthians 6:9-10 (NIV)** <sup>9</sup>Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup>nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

We can wink all we want at this kind of behavior, but the Word of God is clear!

**Illus.** Peter Cartwright was a well-known Methodist circuit rider. He was to speak one Sunday at a church near Washington D.C. and the elders took him aside and said: “Now, Peter - Andrew Jackson is coming to services this morning. We know you can kinda tell it like it is. And we would like for you to be very respectful of the President today.”

**According to the story, Peter Cartwright's first three sentences of his sermon were this: I understand that President Andrew Jackson is in this morning's service. I have been asked to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson is going to hell if he doesn't repent.**

**Well actually everyone in the church was embarrassed. When the service was over Jackson came up to Cartwright and shook his hand and said: "Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world."**

**Like any preacher, I sometimes struggle with knowing when to be guarded in my remarks and when to speak plainly. It is not always easy to know when to use humor. Should I be a prophet because there is so much evil in the world, or should I be a priest because there is so much hurt and sickness? Therein lies the tension.**

**How does one share the truth about such an important issue as repentance and eternal life? I do not always know for sure. I only know someone must!**