

## John the Baptist Type Hope

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Rev. Michael Solberg

*Texts: Luke 3: 1-6*

There are a lot of things I love about being a pastor in this congregation. Perhaps first among them is that I love being spiritually nourished by you members. Even before I started here, it was obvious that this congregation is massively committed to the work of justice, but it took arriving among you for me to see that this is also a place of real spiritual depth.

I won't mention their name because I didn't get permission ahead of time to use this, but at a committee meeting not long ago someone opened with a reflection that has stuck with me. Here is part of it: "I shared in our last meeting that I'd been mad at hope - too Pollyanna, let down too many times lately, just sick of hoping." She went on then to talk about a commencement speech by Kym Lucas, the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Colorado. Bishop Lucas said: "My favorite image of hope came from a guy named Matthew on Twitter. He said, 'People speak of hope as if it is this delicate, ephemeral thing made of whispers and spiders' webs. It's not. Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles and the grit of cobblestone in her hair. And she just spat out a tooth as she got back up and went for another go.' That is the kind of hope that we need, this persistent, relentless hope."

That is what hope in the darkness is all about. That personified depiction of hope made me think of the saying I have used for years as a footer on my personal email: "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are." That saying has been attributed to St. Augustine, a bishop in Africa 1600 years ago. It's unlikely he ever actually said such a thing, but then to me, it's possible, because St. Augustine was a great student of scripture, and he could well have learned that wisdom from what Luke says about John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was all about hope – the hope that births anger and courage, the hope that has dirt on her face. But to see why John's hope was not just Pollyanna, a hope that lets you down too many times, a delicate, ephemeral thing, let's look at today's passage from Luke more seriously.

You might remember that the passage starts with politics, with the hard reality of power and empire and oppression. "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governing Judaea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...and while Annas and Caiaphas held the high priesthood." Even now, 2000 years later, we can't read those words without echoes of murder ringing in our ears. Herod is the one who killed all the first-born boys in and around Bethlehem fearing the birth of a rival king announced by the wise-men. Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas are the ones responsible for the execution of Jesus. Cinematically, the passage works like the opening scene of some of the Star Wars movies which begin with a starship passing overhead, and it just goes on and on, growing larger and larger, filling up more and more of the screen, showing the ultimate power and might of the Empire.

Then having set up this invincible wall of power, Luke says simply, "a word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the desert." The restraint here is stunning. There's no parallel description of the heavenly armies, no mention of all the times God has defeated the mightiest enemies, just a word that

comes to a guy in the desert, the hinterlands, the powerless places. Talk about hope in the darkness.

And we hear that John calls people to a baptism of the heart's transformation, as my translation puts it, for the forgiveness of sins. Here's the thing about baptism, whether Jewish or Christian: it's an individual thing. It happens one person, one changed heart, at a time. And it is not a call to arms. It is a call to give up arms. It's a call to jihad, as our Muslim friends name it, to the inner struggle against evil in our own lives. And I guarantee you that a few people doing their own spiritual work out in the desert are no match for the empire.

But then we learn that this baptism isn't simply about the inner struggle of our hearts. Somehow, this is a prelude to something bigger. A preparation for something astounding, something more: 'Prepare the way of the Almighty, make straight God's paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and whatever is crooked shall become straight, and the rough roads shall become smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

In an instant, we've gone from a word in the wilderness to "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

But to be fair, we have to ask, what's the connection here? It is not at all clear how we get from a word in the wilderness, to God's salvation of all flesh. And, forgive me for being uninspired by scripture, but this "prepare the way the Almighty" stuff sounds kind of like a hope that just doesn't cut it, a Pollyanna hope, a wispy hope. This is one point in the Bible where the passive voice is particularly troubling. "Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and whatever is crooked shall become straight, and the rough roads shall become smooth;" Okay, and who is the active agent here? Who is doing this? Who's gonna get out the shovels and pick axes and dynamite and rubble haulers and earth movers to make all that happen?

Here's where I think the Season of Advent almost stands in our way of truly hearing the message of scripture, at least it certainly stands in the way of us hearing the message of John the Baptist properly. There is a way in which Advent is warm and quiet and pretty and about the virtues of hope, peace, love and joy. But there is more too it as well. Emma addressed it last week in her sermon, and I'll say it again in a different way: there is a sharp edge to Advent. There is an Advent that has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles and the grit of cobblestone in her hair.

Today's passage, you see, assigned by the divines who decide the lectionary readings, stops short of giving us the full message of John the Baptist. Ending the reading with "And all flesh shall see God's salvation," leaves us no clue to how that comes about. But the passage continues...

*So John said to the crowds going out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers, who divulged to you that you should flee from the wrath that is coming? Bear fruits, then, worthy of a change of heart...And the crowds questioned him, saying, "What then should we do?" And he said to them, "Whoever has two tunics must share with him who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." And tax-collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what must we do?" And he said to them, "Collect nothing more than you are required to." And men serving in the army also questioned him, saying, "And we too, what should we do?" And he told them, "Neither extort from, nor falsely accuse, anyone; and be contented with your wages."*

*And John spoke aloud to everyone, saying, "I indeed baptize you in water; but there comes one mightier*

*than I, regarding him I am not fit to loosen the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you in a Holy Spirit and fire; whose winnow is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his threshing floor, and will gather his grain into the storehouse, and will burn away the chaff with inextinguishable fire.” Thus, then, with many and various exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people; but Herod the tetrarch, having been censured by John concerning Herodias, his brother’s wife, and concerning all the wicked things Herod had done, crowned all those things with the addition of this: He shut John up in prison.*

You can almost hear the iron bars clanging closed in condemnation of the truth John the Baptist spoke. There’s that hope with dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles and the grit of cobblestone in her hair. It’s fascinating that every form of repentance John describes, for all three groups he addresses, every one of them has to do with money. Repentance is a change of heart that bears fruit, and that fruit, at least here, gets to the root of who we are and what we truly value: To the crowds he says, “If you have two coats, give one of them (that’s 50% mind you) to someone who has none.” To the tax-collectors he says, “Don’t enrich yourself at the expense of others.” To the soldiers he says, “don’t use your power to make yourselves rich.” Then, of course, he is also speaks truth to power, to Herod, and winds up rotting in jail, and is finally beheaded: dirt on his face, blood on his knuckles and the grit of cobblestone in his hair.

In John, hope truly gave birth to anger and courage. Hope gave birth to anger at the way things are, and to courage to see that they do not remain as they are. Indeed, the source of John’s hope is that he can see that this world is not as it should be, and he’s not okay with that. All that John does is based on his determination to keep that other world in mind, and speak the truth of it. John doesn’t make anything happen himself. He calls people to a change of heart, to bear fruit, and he makes it plain what that means in their lives, but every single one of those people still had to do the work in their own lives, in their own hearts. John can’t create the new world, but he can doggedly and persistently and courageously point to the new world that is created in Christ.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the work of John the Baptist is not about changing the world, but rather about living as a witness to the world that God has changed through Jesus. We should not be surprised, therefore, if the way we live makes the change visible (Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew, p. 25). Being such a witness means living and speaking as people who are in love with the way of Jesus.

So I am going to end where I began. With honoring the life of this congregation. Our passion for justice is a beautiful thing. The fact we long ago overcame the dividing wall of sexual orientation is a beautiful thing. Bringing gifts today to show Christ’s love for others is a beautiful thing. Being committed to being an anti-racist church is a beautiful thing. Believing that reparations are not optional, but a debt we owe from the sins of our past is a beautiful thing. Providing shelter and services for unhoused people is a beautiful thing. Hosting a weekly meal for whoever comes is a beautiful thing.

But just as much as all of that it is a beautiful thing that all of that is motivated by hope – hope that births anger and courage. That’s hope that looks at this world in which we live and doesn’t just see the injustice and the pain and inequality, but sees seeds of something new being brought about by God. We don’t have to change the world, we just have to live as witnesses to the world that God has changed through Jesus Christ. That’s the hope of John the Baptist. That’s the hope of Advent. That’s the hope that has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles and the grit of cobblestone in her hair. That’s the hope that just spat out a tooth as she got back up and went for another go.

In the name of the Living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.