

As I begin this morning, I'm wondering if any of you received some good news in the past four weeks? Good news comes in many different forms:

- news that made the sports team
- news that you were accepted into that university class
- news about a new place to live, or a new job
- news about an upcoming family reunion

Good news comes in many forms but it always gladdens the heart and strengthens the weary. We are all in need of good news.

The prophet Isaiah once wrote the following, *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”*¹

This morning, we are set to begin a new teaching series through the Gospel of Luke. The word “gospel” simply means “good news.” The first four books of the New Testament are called “gospels” because they tell us about the person and work of Jesus Christ. His birth, His life, His death, and resurrection are still good news for us and our world today.

Perhaps you are just beginning to consider Jesus, or, perhaps you have followed Jesus most of your life—either way, I trust you will encounter Him as good news for today.

Luke 1-2 deals with the birth of Jesus and we will return to these

chapters as we approach the Christmas season; this morning I want to encourage you to turn with me to Luke 3.

I think perhaps the best way to make our way through this text is to follow its natural contours. For those of you who like to follow an outline, I've broken our text into four smaller sections: vs. 1-6, 7-9, 10-14, and 15-18.

1. Vs. 1-6: Redemption History

The good news concerning Jesus was (and is) connected to time, place, and people. This news didn't appear out “thin air,” it wasn't concerned with purely spiritual matters—it came to a particular people, in a particular place, and it had to do with real history.

The first two verses of Luke 3 certainly sound like history, don't they? *“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 Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”*

God's people were living in the Promised Land but Rome was their Master. Pontius Pilate, Caesar's watch dog, ruled Jerusalem through fear and oppression. There was no longer a king in Israel, only a tetrarch—a kind of second-rate prince—and these tetrarchs weren't from the royal line. Many of the priests were no better; they didn't

¹ Isaiah 52:7; c.f. Romans 10:14-15.

belong to the priestly line of Aaron, and they were more interested in power than in the worship of God.

It was into this situation that *“the word of God came to John the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. 5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6 And all people will see God’s salvation.’”*

By linking John’s message to Isaiah 40, Luke casts John in a particular role—he is a kind of the prophetic forerunner. The Lord is coming to offer salvation for all people, but John’s preaching comes first; in essence, this is John’s message—*ready or not, here God comes!*

illus: when important guests are coming for dinner, we try to get our house in order; there is food to be cooked, a house to be cleaned, and a table to be set—we want to be prepared for their arrival. This is what the Isaiah quotation is on about; he pictures creation busily preparing for God’s arrival by levelling every obstacle that might stand in His way. *Let every valley be filled in, every mountain made low, straighten the crooked road, make the rough way smooth—God is coming!*

Isaiah’s implicit question is this: if creation itself is busily preparing for God’s arrival, how much more should human hearts?

John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance has to do with turning away from old, dead, sinful patterns, and a returning to God. Repentance gets our hearts in order; repentance levels the obstacles that stand in the way. Let’s now turn our attention to vs. 7-9.

2. Vs. 7-9: Good News and Bad News?

“7 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? 8 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. 9 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.”

In dividing our text into sections, there is a danger in treating them too separately. The conclusion of vs 6 reads, *“all people will see God’s salvation”* but vs 7 begins with images of judgement. How did we get from salvation to snakes, coming wrath, and a fire that consumes?

Remember, John came announcing the impending arrival of the Lord. His message was simple: He is coming. Prepare your hearts, repent and return to the Lord or you will miss out on what He is bringing—forgiveness, life, salvation. In one respect, the movement is quite natural—there is no need for salvation, unless there is something to be saved from. John puts it quite starkly—to ignore God’s offer of mercy is to choose a path that leads to judgement.

John wasn’t afraid to question the sincerity of those being baptized. They may have been willing to submit to a symbolic dunk in the

river, but were they willing for their desires and behaviour to be cleansed? There is a big difference between true repentance and putting on appearances.

illus: The story is told of Queen Elizabeth arriving in a British Commonwealth country, and its people feverishly preparing a royal welcome. In order to make things more presentable, they paid special attention to the highway that ran from the airport to the capital. The government paid for each house along the way to receive a fresh coat of paint—but only on the front of the house.²

There is preparation, and then there is putting on appearances. Baptism without repentance counts for nothing; God is looking for our allegiance, not acts of piety.

Not only does John question their sincerity, he also questions their sense of security. “Does your ethnicity make you acceptable to God? You have more in common with poisonous snakes than you do with Abraham.” “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...The axe is already at the root of the trees*”.

I confess, John’s words rub me the wrong way. Like most of you, I have been raised in a culture that demands maximum freedom but wants limited responsibility. We want maximum freedom to choose what we want, and limited responsibility for the consequences of our choices. *If God is loving, He will let me do what I want. And if God is loving, He will eliminate the negative consequences of my choices.*

In the last 75 years, there has been a progression in Western thinking. At one time the prime value was to *do good*, but over time this thinking changed and the prime value became to *be good*—as though one could be good without actually having to do good. Today the prime value is no longer to do good or be good, but to *feel good*. By and large, this has become the chief goal of western society.

We live in a narcissistic culture. We tell ourselves, “What I feel, I must act on. If I don’t act on what I feel, I’m not being true to myself.” Where the Scripture conflicts with what we want—or think we deserve—we are more likely to look with suspicion on the Scripture, instead of our desires. People are looking for a God who will use supernaturally provide whatever they want—some approach Jesus, hoping that He will provide this kind of service.

illus: When I came up on stage this morning, I brought a container with me and some of you are dying to see what’s inside; I’ll tell you right now—it’s a bobblehead. Now years ago, bobbleheads were only found in sports stadiums—they were commissioned in the form of famous athletes and given away to the first 1000 fans to arrive at the game. But bobbleheads have become big business, and today you can commission a bobblehead of any kind—you can commission a bus driver bobblehead, a figure skating bobble head, you can even commission a bobblehead in your image.

Knowing that this bobblehead purchase would likely be my first and last, I decided that I should really make it count and choose an image of someone who is really important—that’s why I purchased a bobblehead Jesus.

² <https://www.ivpress.com/bible/study.php?study=412>

Isn't this the God that many people dream of? Always available, easy to talk to, doesn't talk back, and easily manipulated. Let me show you what I mean.

- “Jesus, you don't want me to feel pain do you? I didn't think so.”
- “Jesus, I really want to do the right thing here but the cost to benefit ratio is a little low on this one; is it okay if I take a pass this time? I knew you'd agree.”
- “Jesus, the Bible tells me that what I want is wrong, but it feels so right to me; should I just follow my heart on this one? Thanks a million Jesus; I owe You one!

If you want a god who will go with your flow, then I'd highly recommend bobblehead Jesus. Let's leave bobblehead Jesus for a moment and I want you to imagine with me the following relationship between a parent and their child.

Imagine a parent going to their 14 year old daughter or son and giving them the following three gifts: a no-limit credit card, keys to a brand new car (complete with a fake drivers license), and full access to the liquor cabinet. And along with these gifts, the parent offers the following message: “buy whatever you want, drive wherever you want, and drink as much as you want.”

Are you still with me? Imagine the spending, the driving, and the drinking getting out of control, but instead of parent limiting their child's freedom, they protect the child from the consequences of their behaviour. They pay off the credit card every month, they pay for the speeding tickets and the smashed bumpers, they even use their connections to get the drunk driving charges dropped by the police.

Here's the question: would we call someone who parented this way “good”? We wouldn't. The thing is many people want God to behave like this parent. They want maximum freedom, and, they want God to shoulder all the responsibility and all the consequences of their choices. This kind of world, and God, simply does not exist.

When we turn away from God, we turn away from the Source of Life. The “good news” isn't that there is no judgment, but that instead of judgement, God offers mercy. *Will you turn to Him today?* Let's turn our attention to the next section, vs. 10-14.

3. Vs. 10-14: Walking The Talk (implications)

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don't collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. 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.”

After listening to his preaching, three groups of people ask John about the implications of repentance—*what then shall we do?* To the crowd, John said: “if you have more than you need, share with those who have less than they need.” To the tax collectors, John said: “don't take more than what is required—don't get rich at the expense of others.” To the soldiers, John said: “don't abuse your power through extortion or false accusation.”

illus: Perhaps you've heard the story about the skeptic who shouted up to heaven, "God, if you're really up there, tell us what we should do!" A voice from heaven thundered in response, "Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice." The skeptic was alarmed. "Just testing," he said. "Me too," replied the voice.³

John's crowd knew intuitively what many in our culture do not—there is no such thing as a private faith. Allegiance to God leads to living generously and justly with people around us. True repentance does not leave us as we are; God changes us from the inside out.

We may not be tax collectors or soldiers, but John's implications remain. Are we concerned about the welfare of others? Does our concern lead us to action, to generosity, to sharing our resources? Do we use people for our own ends? All of us have power, however limited. The question is, *how do we use power?*

As children, you have the power to make your parents miserable—do you use this power? Parents, you have the power to manipulate or harass your children—do you use this power? As spouses, you have the power to manipulate your spouse to get what you want—do you use this power? Bosses, you have the power to overwork and underpay your employees—do you use this power? *We are to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*

There is one final section to cover; let's take a look at vs. 15-20.

4. Vs. 15-20: Look at Him

"The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 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." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them."

When John began to preach in the wilderness, he looked, sounded, and acted like a prophet; it wasn't long before some people began to wonder if he was something more. God's people were crying out for rescue, for justice, for an end to oppression. People wanted to know, was John the long expected deliverer?

But John quickly pointed away from himself; he was no more than a messenger. John describes the coming Messiah as marked by three characteristics: power, presence, and purifying fire. *One who is more powerful than I will come...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

Most religions prescribe a way for humanity to move towards God, but in Christianity the movement is exactly opposite. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has moved towards us—He has bridged the gap between heaven and earth. In fact, through Jesus Christ, God has not only made His dwelling among us, He has become one of us.

³ N.T. Wright, *Luke For Everyone*, 35.

I wonder, where do you need His power at work in your circumstances? Where do you face a burden too heavy to carry? What mountain seems impossible to climb? Jesus comes, in power.

I wonder, where do you need assurance of God's presence? There is no such thing as a God-forsaken place; there is no situation that is void of His presence. Even in the darkest night, the darkness is as light to the Lord⁴—you are never alone. He comes to be with us, to live in us—the Holy Spirit is God's Empowering Presence.

I wonder, where do you need God's purifying fire? Do you have hurts, habits, or hang ups preventing you from embracing life more fully?

Conclusion:

As I conclude this morning, let's return to John's simple message. *Ready or not, the Lord is coming. Prepare your hearts, repent and return to the Lord or you will miss out on what He brings—forgiveness, life, salvation.*

In the coming months, we are going to be exploring the person and work of Jesus Christ. If you've been thinking about inviting a seeking friend, family member, or neighbour to join you at church, the coming months are a prime opportunity. We are all in need of good news and I trust in the months to come we will discover together just how good the news of Jesus is.

Pray

⁴ Psalm 139:12

Worship Response: O Lord, You're Beautiful

Prayer Ministry

- *where do you need God's power at work in your circumstances?*
- *where do you need assurance of God's presence?*
- *where do you need His purifying fire?*