

## Luke 3:1-14 – A Different Preacher

There is a sharp contrast between the preaching of John and most preaching today. You can see it in response to the preaching. When John preached, he laid bare the sins of the people, exposed their guilt and shame. They could only respond: “What then shall we do?” Most preaching today is less personal and less direct, less about sin and more about achieving your hopes and dreams. It shows up in the response of the people. Today, the biggest question after the sermon is not “What then shall we do?” but “Where shall we eat?” In other words, John preached a message that meant life could not go on as it had been. Today’s preaching seems almost designed to keep up the status quo, which appears to be what the hearers want.

So whose fault is it? Are the preachers of today worse or the people? Or both? Vague preaching designed around subtlety is definitely a problem. When we are not convicted by the weight and burden of our sin and moved to call on God, something is wrong with the preaching. When we are distracted from hearing the Word of God because our hearts and minds are caught up in the here and now, something is wrong with the hearers. Every sermon should lead us to ask and every hearer moved to ask “What then shall we do?”

John came as the voice crying in the wilderness. It was his voice but God’s Word. God was speaking through this preacher to awaken His people to prepare for the Savior who was coming. John did not mince his words. He called out judgment against sin – a judgment that could not be set aside by the claim of pedigree (we are Abraham’s children) or place (we are people of power and position). The urgency of John’s preaching was marked by the pointed nature of what He preached. No one will escape the consequence of what God is doing. No one. Nowhere. No how.

But this was no doom and gloom message. It was not “repent for the end is near.” No, this was the voice of hope. **“Repent for the Kingdom of God is near.”** In other words, the focus was not escaping the wrath of God but being ready to meet the mercy of God. God was coming to His people to save them. He was entering time and taking on flesh to fulfill His promise of salvation and deliver His people from their sins. It was not mere fear that shaped the people’s response but profound hope.

They were called not to run and hide but to confront sin with repentance. The promise here is that if you confess your sin, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Does it sound familiar? We need to get rid of our sin not to escape God’s wrath but to meet His Son who comes with salvation and life.

Our problem today is not merely that we don’t get all that upset about sin. Our problem is that we do not hunger and thirst for righteousness. We have grown casual and complacent. The message is not urgent because we expect God to meet us as we are – just like everyone else must. We are not moved to live repentant lives because we no longer hunger for God, at least not a God who does not like us just the way we are.

John confronted people with their sins so that God might call the people to repentance and bear the fruits of repentance in their lives. In this way, John connected what happens in the heart with what is lived out in life. Today we live comfortably with the idea that our spirits can be pure even if our lives are dirty. We do not struggle very hard against evil and we do not strive very hard for goodness. John’s message is as appropriate for us as it was for the people of old. Connect the heart with the lips and lives. Let the faith that lives in your heart make its stamp upon your daily life.

Ultimately, John was not speaking for himself. No preacher does. The message is God’s though the voice may belong to the preacher. The call of God does not come to us today to prepare for the coming of the Savior to be born in Bethlehem but to prepare for His return to finish His new creation. He is calling to us not to shape up for judgment but to prepare for the completion of the work of God we know from Bethlehem, from Calvary, and from the Garden of the Empty Tomb.

Good preaching always leads us to choices. Not the decision to be saved or not – this is God’s work in us and we do not cooperate for our salvation. But to choices of how then shall we live because we are new people in Christ by baptism and faith. We do not cooperate in our salvation but God has placed new hearts and spirits in us so that we might work with Him to become the people He has declared us to be – we call this sanctification. God’s work in us and through us. What then shall we do? This is the call to let the faith that comes so easily to our lips come also to our actions and works.

Live through repentance or die in judgment. Sounds harsh doesn’t it? Well, in one sense, both involve death. One is the death that brings forth life in us and the other is the life that ends only in death. What shall we do? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent of our sins and live daily in the light of God’s mercy. And be saved. Salvation is an event accomplished once for all on the cross but it is also the process through which God is at work in us making us into the people He has declared us to be in our baptism ... and it is also the hope we expect and await when Christ comes to seal His victory for all eternity.

Where preaching does not confront us with this urgency, it is flawed and pointless. Where we do not hear this compelling call to repentance and faith, we are the complacent who are oblivious to what God has done and what He has promised to do. “What then shall we do?” Believe, repent, and bear the fruits of repentance in your daily life.