

July 2, 2017
Luke 3:1-14

How Do Our Lives Point to God?

We know John the Baptist. We know all about this guy standing on the banks of the river Jordan, calling people to repent. Telling them that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Warning them of the wrath this is to come.

We know about John the Baptist. He's the one who prepares the way of the Lord. He's the one who gets us ready for Jesus.

Usually John the Baptist is presented as the opening act of the gospels.

He is there to warm up the crowds for Jesus. Biblical scholars call John the Baptist a transitional figure. One who transitions the audience from one time to another, from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

John looks and sounds just like the Old Testament prophets with his camel hair costume and his old timey promises. But he introduces us to something new, to someone with new promises from God.

We think of John the Baptist as the one introducing Jesus. But that's not the only thing John does in the Bible. John the Baptist also shows us how to be faithful in times of transition. In these in-between times, that we always seem to be in, moving from old to new, from this life to the

next, John the Baptist shows us how to be the people of faith who point beyond ourselves to God. He gives us three important things to do as a community of believers. First, we must live our faith with urgency.

Second, we must bear fruits worthy of repentance. And third, we must take our faith to work with us.

First, John the Baptist teaches us to live with urgency. We must live as if our faith is important. As if God's coming Kingdom matters to us. As if we have a little heat under us because there is something we expect to happen. Like a restaurant owner expecting the visit of the health inspector. And you have to be ready. And there can't be an "I'll-get-around-to-it-someday" attitude. "Yeah, yeah, someday I'll mop the floors. Someday I'll get rid of the cockroaches. Someday I'll clean the moldy stuff out of the fridge." No, no, no, says John the Baptist. We need to ready now. We need to take faith seriously now. Because a life of faith is important to us. This stuff about new hearts and new spirits and new life for the world, it matters to us. And it matters right now how we live and how we share that life with the rest of creation. It matters that if we say we believe God is God then we should act like it. We

should act like God is our God, not money or power or popularity. We should pursue God's Kingdom, not our own kingdoms of self-righteousness or greed. Our God makes a way out of oppression. That's what John reminds us of as he reminds us of God bringing God's people out of captivity in Babylon. That God wants to remove all barriers to life and freedom. God cuts down mountains and lifts up valleys and paves the way to joy for the least and the last and the lost.

In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger says we, the faithful, should live with a little heat under us. Imagine the church is like a Crockpot. See, when you make a meal in a Crockpot, you put in raw vegetables and raw meat and some seasonings and some broth, and maybe a little wine. And then you turn on the heat and let it cook. Now if there is too much heat, you get a burnt mess. Tough meat, scorched veggies. But if there is no heat, and no urgency in what we are do, then the meal doesn't get made at all. Everything remains raw and hard and inedible.¹ But with the right amount heat, the right amount of persistence

¹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, IVP Books p, 140.

and purpose and drive, then the church cooks up something wonderful. It makes something delicious that feeds the hungry and hungry of heart. People of faith, all of us, each of us, need to feel that urgency. That our mission matters and it matters that we are a part of it. Because if we don't, then this church will be inedible. Because without you, we wouldn't have a Community Garden or a Backpack ministry or a youth group that ministers to our young folks. Without your commitment, we wouldn't have worship. We couldn't have devotions at the Homeplace. We couldn't tutor kids at the elementary school. We couldn't pray for one another and support one another and welcome strangers and minister to the homeless. Without you, we couldn't be a place where people gather to share in God's feast of grace. A meal cooked in the slow persistence of love. Without heat, without urgency, our faith would be a cold, uncooked mess.

John the Baptist calls us to live with urgency, first of all. To dial up our commitment. And second, he tells us that we must bear fruits worthy of repentance. As people of faith, we must be ready to repent. To admit to our own faults and frailties. To allow God to continually create and re-

create us. We must expect that change will be a part of life. And that every person of faith will need change. That none of us is perfect. And the only time we will be perfect is when we die and we are joined to the perfection of Christ. Glory, Halleluiah. Each of us is a work in progress; all of us need forgiveness and second chances. Our faith is not faith in us, but faith in a God who, in spite of us, doing great things.

It's not easy to live that life of repentance. It's not easy to continually admit that we've done things wrong and that we struggle to do things right and that there are things that we need to change about ourselves.

It's much easier to confess that someone ELSE has done things wrong and that someone ELSE can never get things right. And that someone ELSE needs to change. But John the Baptist says that being faithful means repentance for us. It means asking God to change us. Because we can't change others; only ourselves. And if we focus on how others need to change, it will make us angry and bitter and envious and proud. We are to bear the fruits of repentance. The fruit of the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. Bear that fruit in yourselves, John the Baptist says. Repent. Reorient yourself to

God. And repeat. Just because you say you are a Christian doesn't excuse you. Just because your family has gone to church for generations, or because you are a son or daughter of Abraham, it doesn't mean you can phone it in. Living a faithful life means turning to God. Again and again. It means letting God correct and recalibrate us, again and again. We must bear fruits worthy of repentance. We must live with the urgency of God's fast-approaching Kingdom. And third, John the Baptist teaches us that we must take our faith to work with us. Our faith isn't something we practice only at church. Being a Christian isn't just for Sunday mornings. We must live our faith out in the world. Whatever we do and wherever we go. The crowds ask John what they must do. What does this new life mean? HOW do they live lives oriented to the Kingdom of God? And it's interesting to me what John DOESN'T them. John the Baptist doesn't tell the crowds to move out into the desert or go live in a cave. He doesn't tell them to form a separatist community for the righteous with a big wall and a locked gate. He doesn't tell them that they need to quit their jobs and become missionaries and ministers. He tells them to take their faith with them; to take their renewed devotion to

God's compassion and justice and take it to work. Take it with you wherever you go in the world. Pay attention. Act like God is with you. "If you see someone in need, John the Baptist says, share. Share your clothing. Share your food. Take faith with you wherever you go. Take it with you to school. Take it with you into the classroom and the boardroom and the courtroom and the break room and the living room in your own home. Don't let compassion and justice be church words. Don't let them be someone else's job. Let them be your job, whatever you do. If you are a tax collector, be fair. If you are a soldier, be kind. If you are a kid, be helpful. If you are retired, be generous. Whatever you do, be a light to the world, in the world in which you live.

We might think it's harder now than it's ever been. We might think this day and age is not like the day and age of Jesus. It was probably easier then for people to have faith. But Jesus' world was the world of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and King Herod and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. It was a world of dictators and tyrants and no trial by jury and no human rights. And Luke the gospel writer reminds us of that. He names all the powerful rulers of the time for a reason. Because we are

called to be faithful wherever we are. In a real time and a real place. And in our real time and place, we are called to be faithful too. So how do we live this faith of ours that matters so much to us? In our own time and place, in our own work and play, how can our lives be lives of compassion and justice? How can we be fair? How can we be kind? How can share the love of our God who has shared so much love with us?

John the Baptist isn't a prelude to faith. He teaches us faith. In this time of transition and change. In this real time and place of ours in which we are always moving from old to new, from this life to the next, John the Baptist shows us how to be the people of God. By remembering that our times and places change, but God does not. That our lives will change, our churches will change, our families will change, but God's love will stay the same. God is always the God of abundant life. Who sets the captives free. Who makes a way home. Who insists on loving us no matter what. We are on a mission to share that good news. And may we have the patience and urgency to do so. May we have the humility to let God shape us and reshape us in the process. May we have the integrity

to take our faith to work, to be people of hope and grace wherever we go.

Resolution:

I will act with compassion and justice in my daily life by...

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