

Hear the Voice in the Wilderness

☆ “You brood of vipers!” (vv.1-7)

☆ What to do... (vv.7-14)

☆ What to believe... (vv.15-18)

In the Name of Jesus the coming Christ of God, wretched sinners all:

Would you have gone out there to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist? Dusty roads for twenty miles about 6,000 feet drop in elevation to the Jordan River – below sea level at that point. Several days of work lost, then the long climb back up to Jerusalem? Why would you go out when he called you...?

☆ “You brood of vipers!” (vv.1-7)

Actually, how can you listen sermons like this? In a class with a group of pastors the retired professor began his lecture calling us, “You whores.” What’s that all about? He proceeded to say that we commit spiritual adultery every day. We love created things more than our Creator. The things of this world get us more excited than the things of God and heaven. True for you too? “**You brood of vipers!**” Why do you come out? “*Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*”¹

One thing that keeps me coming along with the sad truth about myself are details like these supplied by Paul’s “*dear friend Luke, the doctor.*” (Colossians 4:14 NIV84) His education is apparent from careful research of eyewitnesses and the way he precisely pins his report to world events. It took a while for archaeology to catch up with these details: “*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*” We saw the replica of a stone in Caesarea with the name “Pontius Pilate” on it. The Holy Spirit inspired Luke with these names from secular history. I come because I’m convinced.

But I’m also convicted. John *went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁴ *Just 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 of the Lord! Make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways will become smooth. ⁶And everyone² will see the salvation of God.”* It’s the mountains of my pride and the valleys of my despair that make me unfit to come into the presence of the holy God, the Judge almighty. But He kindly comes to me with honest prophets like Isaiah and John the Baptist, not afraid to identify my sin for the damnation that it deserve, yet filled with God’s mercy and grace. Like a highway for a king, God makes His way clear to my heart for healing.

☆ What to do... (vv.7-14)

None of us like to think of ourselves as wretched sinners, just as no one wants to be sick or diseased. But God’s kindness leads us to repentance. (Romans 2:4) First, He makes us truly sorry for our sins. Then He gives us every reason to trust His forgiving grace that took all our sins away. God’s kind hearted Gospel of forgiveness is what people streamed out of the cities to hear John **in the Wilderness**.

¹ W.P. ~ Wartburg Project – Luke popular review – unless otherwise stated the Bible text. [M.C. 12/07/2014]

² 6 Or: “all flesh”

John helped them all to see how they could prove their repentance by their deeds. ***“Therefore produce fruits right for repentance! Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that from these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham.”*** That’s like someone thinking that being a Lutheran or a Catholic or Baptist or calling yourself a “Christian” for that matter, makes you right with God. No denominational affiliation will save you from damnation. Only God’s love in Christ can do that. Anything of your own works or external help beyond Christ is as worthless as dirt before God. As Isaiah put it, ***“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”*** (Isaiah 64:6) “Then,” you ask, “Why should Johnny be good?” John says, because ***“even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. It always produces good works. Those good works can’t save you, but ***“faith without works is dead.”*** (James 2:26) It’s like a tree dead and shriveled and only good for firewood. Good works are evidence of faith.

See why the people were asking, ***“What shall we do?”*** John told them how they could prove their repentance by their deeds to show that their “faith” was not just a bunch of worthless words. The ***crowds*** should share what they have with those who have not. The ***tax collectors*** should not collect any more than authorized by the government. The ***soldiers*** should not use their superior fire power to force confessions or payment of bribes. Isn’t this true for all of us? ***“Be satisfied with your wages.”*** Show you are God’s children who trust His goodness and generosity by being content and sharing with others. When you love as you have been loved and forgive as you have been forgiven, you show yourself to be repentant and faithful children of the heavenly Father. What you do results from God’s love telling you...

☆ What to believe... (vv.15-18)

Sometimes parents tell me their children think the pastor is “Jesus” or “God.” I thought the same thing about my pastor when I was a little boy. Stick around long enough, you find out the truth of how God calls sinners to repentance and some repentant sinners to be pastors. John the Baptist didn’t wait for people to figure it out on their own. John freely admitted that he was not the Christ. He could only pour on water as commanded by God to prepare people’s hearts for the coming Christ. His was a valid Christian baptism that did not need to be repeated when some of John’s disciples became Jesus’ disciples. Jesus Himself would be baptized by John the Baptist with the words from God the Father and the Holy Spirit present in the form of a dove. Not a better baptism, but a better Baptizer was coming.

“I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Jesus Christ is the Son of God and certainly the most powerful Baptizer ever. As God, Jesus is appointed to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day. Like an ancient farmer with a shovel tossing the grain into the wind, Jesus will separate the ***wheat*** from the ***chaff***. The ***wheat***, believers in Jesus as their Savior, ***He will gather into his barn***, to enjoy the everlasting bliss of heaven. ***“But the chaff,”*** the unrepentant sinners who refused God’s forgiving grace in Christ, ***“he will burn up with unquenchable fire.”*** There will be no second chances, no reincarnation, only resurrection to life or to eternal damnation.

“Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.” John did all he could to help people see God in this Gospel light. ***“[God] wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*** (1 Timothy 2:4 TPA) So keep on listening. Keep on coming. Keep on admitting how much you need Jesus, and God will keep on telling you how much He loves you for Jesus’ sake. **Hear the Voice in the Wilderness.** The grace of God is calling. Amen.