

## **Becoming a Voice**

Luke 3:1-20

### **(Discussion Guide at the end)**

Do you have a voice? I don't mean do you have a good speaking or singing voice? I mean, are you influencing others? Do you have something to say that people need to hear and are you saying it? Whose voice are you listening to? Whose voice has the greatest influence in your life?

Because of the rise of social media, there has been a great increase in various people becoming influential voices in our world for good and evil, especially among young adults. These YouTubers and podcasters have a voice in the culture not because they talk fast or loudly, but because people are listening. And people are listening because these influencers are making their voices heard and what their saying appeals to the masses.

But long before the rise of social media influencers, there was a man, John the Baptist, who was known as *the Voice of one crying in the wilderness*. He was known as such not because of his singing ability, but because of his critical message and courageous influence.

I want to suggest to you that like John the Baptist, believers are called to be transformational voices to our generation. Because of the transforming power of the gospel, Christians have something eternally significant to say that the world desperately needs to hear. There was only one John the Baptist and he did play a unique role in preparing the way for Christ. He was the original voice.

And as the original voice, he has something to teach us about being a voice for God in our generation, in our churches, and in our homes. We may not rise to the same level of influence today as John or others, but we all have a voice, we all have a platform, and we all have something to say to make a difference for Christ. You have a voice; it's a gift from God. How are you using it? How are you developing it?

**Main idea:** To have a voice in the world for God, we must practice listening to His voice in silence and solitude.

In this message, we are going to look at the life of the one who was prophesied to be The Voice of one crying in the wilderness, and gain some insight into what can make our voice, our influence, and our reach more effective for the eternal good of others.

### 1. **Prepared in the wilderness** (silence and solitude)

How did John become the voice of one crying in the wilderness, a strategically placed messenger and influencer for God in his day? To begin with, John was prepared to be a voice in the wilderness. And as we will see, the wilderness, among things, is a place of silence and solitude. Luke writes:

*“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Luke 3:1-2*

Time will not allow me to give you background on all the historical figures mentioned in this passage. However, there is a reason why Luke gives us details about the place and times that these specific Roman and religious leaders ruled in their day. Luke wanted us to know that it was at this point in history, during the days of these specific rulers that *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*”

We don't want to miss the forest for the trees. The main point that we need to focus on is that the word of God came to John in the wilderness. But again, there's a reason why Luke gives us the background to the start of John's ministry, namely, it happened in the

unfolding events in history, at a specific time, and among a variety of notable people.

Keep in mind that Luke begins his letter by explaining that his account of the life of Christ was based on the information he gathered from eyewitnesses. Jesus and John ministered during a specific time in history. And because of the details that Luke gives us, these events can be and have been verified through other historical writings and archeological evidence.

But more important than the historicity of these events, Luke is emphasizing that in God's upside down Kingdom, His supreme word came to John, a camel hair wearing wilderness man, in the midst of these influential rulers. What's more, God's word, which is the highest word, was not only revealed during the rule of these first century leaders, it had to be proclaimed to them. And indeed it was, by John and Jesus, as the gospels also records.

Now before we get into how God used John to make the good news about Jesus' public, it's important to see that John received the good-news in private. That is, the word of God came to John and He was prepared to deliver that word in the wilderness, in silence and solitude.

As I noted in a previous message, the wilderness in the history of the people of God represents a place of preparation and testing. The wilderness is a place where God equipped His people for what He was calling them to. Moses spent 40 years in the back side of the desert before starting his earthly ministry. David was a shepherd in the wilderness before God called him to be king.

What marked the start of Jesus' public ministry? Luke records in the next chapter that like John, Jesus spent 40 days and nights praying and fasting in the wilderness before the start of His public ministry.

It's important to note here that the Greek word *eremos* translated wilderness can also be translated desert, deserted place, desolate place, solitary place, lonely place, and quiet place.

In his insightful book, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, concerning Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, John Mark Comer observed: “There are stories—lots of them—in all four Gospels about Jesus’ relationship to the eremos, but this is the first story. And I want you to see it because it’s the starting place for his ministry and mission. But it’s an odd story, right? Have you ever read that line—“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil”— and thought to yourself, What’s up with that? I mean, if you’ve been reading the Bible from Genesis up to Matthew, you get that Jesus has to go toe-to-toe with the devil. The protagonist must face the bad-guy-to-end-all-bad-guys. Evil has to be defeated. You get that. But why in the wilderness? Why alone? And why after forty days of fasting? When he’s hungry? For years this story made no sense to me because I thought of the wilderness as the place of weakness. I read it this way:

Isn’t that so like the devil? To come at us at the end of a long day or a long week? When we’re hangry and at our worst? But then I realized I had it backward. The wilderness isn’t the place of weakness; it’s the place of strength. “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” because it was there, and only there, that Jesus was at the height of his spiritual powers. It was only after a month and a half of prayer and fasting in the quiet place that he had the capacity to take on the devil himself and walk away unscathed. That’s why, over and over again, you see Jesus come back to the eremos.” JMC

After His first full day of ministry, for example, the gospel of Mark records: *“And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.”*  
Mark 1:35

As you work your way through the gospels, you will see that in the wilderness, in the quiet place, away from the noise and the crowd where Jesus frequently withdrew to get alone with God, He received, as John Comer writes, “clarity about his identity and calling. He was grounded. Centered. In touch with God and himself. From that place of emotional equilibrium and spiritual [support], he knew precisely what to say yes to and, just as importantly, what to say no to.”

Beloved, if Jesus made silence and solitude a priority so that he could hear from God, how much more do we need to do the same? But how many of you know, there are many things competing for our attention. And many of those things competing for our attention, like providing for our families, or even doing ministry, are not bad things.

But, if we are not careful, good things can become the enemy of the best things, namely giving God our undivided attention in prayer and the word so that He can renew our minds and give rest to our weary souls. Moreover, we must make time to hear God's voice in the inner recesses of our beings so that we can be clear, credible, and courageous voices in our circle of influence.

So, we may need to say NO to some good things so we can say YES to the best things. But the truth is that the challenge that many of us face is not juggling the legitimate responsibilities that we all must fulfill. Rather, for many in this age of social media, online shopping, Netflix, and Smartphones, let's be honest, it's not just good things that our competing for our attention, but mindless, trivial, and superficial things.

John Mark Comer writes: "For all the talk about hurry and overload, most of it is self-inflicted. Philip Zimbardo's recent research on the "Demise of Guys" (i.e., the crisis of masculinity in Western culture) has concluded the average guy spends ten thousand hours playing video games by age twenty-one. Ten thousand hours.

My mind jumps to the research around this rule; in ten thousand hours, you could master any craft or become an expert in any field—from Sumerian archeology to Olympic water polo. You could get your bachelor's degree and your master's degree. You could memorize the New Testament. Or, you could beat level four of Call of Duty." JMC

If playing video games is not something you do, maybe you can relate to the following: the average American spends 705 hours on social media and 2737.5 hours watching television. "Here's the simple truth" says Comer, "...we have all the time we need [to do all that God is calling us to do]. The scary part—the part we all ignore—is that we are

too addicted, too weak, and too distracted to do what we all know is important.

What else could we give thousands of hours of our year to? In twenty minutes of Candy Crush on our morning bus ride, we could pray for every single one of our friends and family members. In an hour of TV before bed, we could read through the entire Bible; in six months. In a day running errands and shopping for [stuff] we really don't need, we could practice Sabbath—an entire seventh of our lives devoted to rest, worship, and the celebration of our journey through God's good world. You see what I'm getting at?" JMC

Beloved, before John was the voice crying in the wilderness, before the start of his public ministry, he was a man that gave God His undivided attention for extended hours in the quiet of the wilderness. Likewise, men and women of God today are a voice for God in a world of competing voices because they spend time alone with Him. They don't just talk to people on behalf of God, they talk to God on behalf of the people. They have influence with people in their public lives—they have a voice because they are influenced much by the voice of God in their private lives.

## **2. Preached to the wandering/wicked (seeking the sinner)**

Secondly, John was not only prepared in the wilderness, in silence and solitude, alone with God, as a result he was sent to preach to the wandering sheep and wicked among them. Luke records:

*“And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

*<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, <sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Luke 3:3-5*

What was the message that John was called by God to proclaim to the lost sheep of Israel? John “proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” “This means a baptism which follows repentance and is a sign of it” (Morris). The call to repentance was a call to acknowledge their grave sinful condition and turn to God for forgiveness, cleansing, and salvation. It was a call to come out of darkness and to step into the light.

Baptism did not wash their sins, but was symbolic of the cleansing, forgiveness, and salvation that only God could give in Christ Jesus. This message from John calling the people to repent of their sin would prepare them for the coming of the messiah. As Luke explained, he was the prophesied *voice* crying in the wilderness who in the power of the Spirit will metaphorically fill the valleys, make low the mountains, and make the rough and crooked, level and straight.

This imagery points to the construction of a road before the approach of a king. And it speaks to the outcome of John’s ministry, which as Luke explained, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Again, John’s call to repentance would prepare people to receive the Savior, the lamb of God who would take away their sins.

Notice also that John’s message was not one that said, turn to God because He will help you to fulfill your earthly dreams and aspirations. His message was one of repentance from sins that leads to forgiveness and salvation. Furthermore, his message separated the sincere from the insincere. Luke writes:

*“He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Luke 3:7-9*

John's Spirit filled preaching was drawing crowds. And there were those in the crowd that were sincerely responding to the good-news of salvation that John proclaimed, but there were others who just wanted to be part of the show, who outwardly wanted to align with John who was gaining a following, but inwardly their hearts were far from God. But John wasn't content with drawing a crowd and gaining a following, he was interested in seeing people truly come to repentance that leads to salvation.

Therefore, John did not sugar coat his messages. With prophetic insight John said to the crowd that came to be baptized, "you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" A person that is truly repentant knows that they're sinners before a holy God in need of the grace of God's forgiveness and power to overcome sin. But the self-righteous think that their own works or religious rituals will save them. They must know it is not so.

There are church leaders today that believe that because the church is a place where people connect with God they must remove barriers that could keep the unchurched people away. As one Pastor noted, "Keep the message positive... no hellfire and damnation stuff. The music should be high quality and upbeat. Preach messages relevant to the felt needs of people's lives. Let them leave feeling a little better about themselves.

I don't think John the Baptist got the memo. He [called] those coming to hear him...a pile of hissing, evil snakes. It is accepted truth in our culture that new beginnings begin with positive self-esteem. But John has a different understanding.

"New beginnings start with self-awareness, not self-esteem. Pride is not the doorway to good beginnings... humility is." Chris Ritter

Moreover, John understood that when a person truly repents, turns to God, and receives the grace of forgiveness, they also receive grace that leads to a changed life. Therefore, John exhorted those in the

crowds, who presumably embraced his message, to also bear the fruits of repentance, the fruits of a life that truly knows the salvation of God.

And because the fruits of repentance are evidence of a truly changed heart, he exhorted his Jewish brothers not to trust in their Jewish heritage. The faith of their fathers can't save them. They must repent and exercise their own faith in the message of salvation. And the evidence that they have done so is again, a changed life.

Notice that in response to John's message, Luke also records: *"And the crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?'"* <sup>11</sup> *And he answered them, 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.'"* <sup>12</sup> *Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?'"* <sup>13</sup> *And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'"* <sup>14</sup> *Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?'"* *And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.'" Luke 3:10-14*

In response to John's message, there were people in the crowd that wanted to know what the fruits of repentance looked like. You know, when there's a genuine work of the Spirit in our hearts, when there's genuine repentance and faith, we want to know what God would have us to do. And at the heart of the answer to what genuine repenters do who have been changed inwardly concerns how we love people.

Later Jesus will teach his disciples that those who are of His upside down kingdom, are not only those who never take advantage of people, but those who go the extra mile to bless others, including those who have not treated you kindly or won't return the favor.

It's important that we also see that John wasn't just the voice of one crying in the wilderness because of what he preached, his life was a sermon. He embodied the message that he preached. He lived a life

of devotion to God. People knew that the hand of God was upon his life.

But although John had great influence over the people, he never promoted himself, he kept pointing people to Jesus. Dr Luke continues:

*“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. <sup>18</sup> So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.” Luke 3:15-18*

Notice that because of John’s powerful witness some in the crowd were thinking that He might be the messiah. But John quickly set the record straight. He not only made it clear that he was not the Christ, but that every thing he was called to do was meant to point people to Christ.

There was no power in his baptism to save. His baptism pointed to the salvation that is found only in Christ who himself would baptize all who believe with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is a metaphor for what the Spirit does in the life of Spirit filled believer; namely make us a burning and shining lamp for Christ. John 5:35

Moreover, John not only made clear that he wasn’t the messiah, he wanted the people that were putting him on a pedestal to know that he wasn’t even worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals.

Christians leaders who are truly a voice for Christ in the church and in the culture always point people away from themselves to something greater. Because they serve before an audience of one, they will not

misrepresent themselves and they surely will not misrepresent Christ for their own gain, like many of the prosperity preachers do today.

Notice that John goes on to describe Jesus as a winnower. A winnower is someone who tosses the grain stalks into the air when the wind is blowing to separate the straw from the chaff. The grain that falls at his feet is gathered into the barn, but the chaff that is blown and swept to the side is later burned in the fire. John was a faithful witness because he wasn't trying to win a crowd, He was seeking to win people to Jesus who is both Savior and Judge.

Likewise, as one commentator explained, "Christians must bear faithful witness to Christ the Judge in a world that would rather Jesus were only a babe in a manger; they would only have Jesus be some wise teacher and consistently deny that he is Judge. Jesus is both the saving Lord who gives his life for sinners and the judging King who weighs us all." Anyabwile

### **3. Persecuted by the wicked** (suffering like the Savior)

Lastly, John was the voice because he was not only prepared in the wilderness, and preached to the wandering, but he was also willing to be persecuted by the wicked for doing so. John was not a respecter of persons. The same gospel he preached to the poor he preached to the powerful. On one occasion he did so and he would pay a heavy price. After explaining that with many other exhortations John preached the good news, Luke adds:

*"But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprov'd by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison."* Luke 3:19-20

As we also learn from Mark's gospel, in addition to John being thrown in prison because he spoke out about Herod's adulterous relationship with his brother's wife, Herodias later persuaded Herod to have him beheaded. John knew what He was dealing with and yet he had the

courage and conviction to call out Herod for his sin, and no doubt he did so with the motivation to see him come to repentance.

It's important to note also that from Mark's gospel we learn that Herod was kind of a fan of John. According to Mark 6:20, it appears that Herod visited John while he was in prison. He was intrigued by him and liked to hear him speak. But John never used that influence to His advantage. You see, he wasn't called to gain fans but to make followers of Jesus.

To be influential voices for Christ requires us to be faithful with the message of the gospel, lovingly forthright with the people we proclaim it to, and willing to face the trouble it may cause us.

This faithful, forthright, and costly gospel witness is how as kingdom influencers we show that "Jesus is Lord in both our preaching and our pain—that we fear God and not man. This is God's calling on the Christian life and how the world will know who Jesus is." Anyabwile

## **Conclusion**

It's been said, he that is intimate with God is not intimidating by man. John was a powerful voice for God in public because he was shaped by God's voice in private, in the quiet place, in silence and solitude.

If you've come to genuine repentance and faith in the person and work of Jesus, you've entered a relationship with God the father. You've been given the precious gift through the baptism of the Spirit and fire to be able to hear His voice.

O let us make time to get away and get alone with our Heavenly Father in silence and solitude so that we can hear His voice and be the voice that people in our lives desperately need to hear.

## Discussion

*Read Luke 3:1-2.* Why did Doctor Luke give a detailed background of the Roman and religious leaders that ruled in the first century when the word of God came to John in the wilderness?

How does Luke demonstrate the upside down kingdom in the first two verses by revealing that the word of God came to John during the rule of the named leaders?

What is the significance of the wilderness to the start of John's public ministry. *See also Luke 1:80.*

*Read Luke 3:3-14.* What was the message that John proclaimed to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? What can we learn from John about how to prepare the way for others to come to Christ?

What does it mean to repent? Do the lost need to repent to come to Jesus?

How is John's baptism different than believers' baptism? How are they similar?

What are the fruits of repentance? Can you be saved and live with unrepentant sin? Why or why not? Do you need to repent? What leads us to repentance?

Why did John call the crowd a brood of vipers? If we speak like this today, won't it drive people away from Christ?

*Read Luke 3:16-18.* What are the marks of a faithful Christian influencer and voice?

What do you need to do or change to be a faithful voice for Christ?

*Read Luke 3:19-20.* Why must we prepare for persecution if we desire to be a faithful voice for Christ?

Why is the gospel offensive to people?

How must you prepare to be an influential voice for Christ?

How does silence and solitude play a significant role in being a significant voice? What adjustments to you need to make, what do you need to change or stop doing to make time to be alone with God and listen to His voice?