

This morning, I am in the second week of a new sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." Over the next number of weeks, I'll be going through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we are going to be in Luke 3:1-22, looking at Jesus and John the Baptist.

Luke 3:1–22 - 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 Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, 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.'" 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." ¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food **should do the same.**" ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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.** ¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison. ²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in

bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke, who was a physician by trade according to Colossians 4:14, wrote both Luke, one of the accounts of Jesus’ life, and Acts, the story of the early church. When you read his works, you can see how carefully he grounds what he writes in the historical context.

Luke 3:1–22 - 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 Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

This is not “once upon a time in the land of Judah.” Historians have been able to pinpoint the timing of this chapter to about 27-29 AD because of all the political and religious leaders who were mentioned. It was a dark time for the people of Israel, as they were living under the rule of a pagan power, Rome. And, there had been no prophet, no word from God, for several centuries, since Malachi in the 5th century BC. In fact, remember how the Old Testament ends:

Malachi 4:5–6 - “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

The final word from God for 500 years prophesies that one would come in the spirit of Elijah before the coming of the Lord. And this is what Jesus has to say about John the Baptist:

Matthew 11:11–14 – “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.”

According to Jesus, John the Baptist is the fulfillment of that final word from God in Malachi 4. He is the one who would come before the day of the Lord, turning people’s hearts. And so, let’s pay attention to what we can learn from John the

Baptist and his interaction with Jesus in Luke 3. I believe there are two very important and countercultural implications for our lives today.

1) You are not the center of the universe; God is

Many of us are familiar with Galileo and the story of how people came to realize that the sun and not the earth is the center of our solar system. But that seismic paradigm shift is nothing compared to the realization that you are not the center of the universe, but God is. I remember when I first realized this at a Promise Keepers rally at RFK Stadium in Washington D.C. in 1997, looking around and seeing 60,000 men gathered to worship God and realizing that they were all here, not for me, but to worship Jesus.

The world does not revolve around you. John was clear about that.

Luke 3:3-6 - 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.’”

The reason that John receives so much attention at the beginning of each gospel is not because he was a godly man, although he was; it is because he is calling the people to prepare the way, to prepare their hearts, for the coming of the Lord. In this passage, Luke shows that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3-5, which is quoted here. John understood that his role was not to be the center of attention, not to draw people to himself, not to receive glory, but to point people to Jesus. Look at what he says in John 3:26-30:

John 3:26–30 - They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”

Take that last verse to heart. When John's disciples tell him that people are leaving him to follow Jesus, he does not get offended or hurt, but rejoices. He says "He must become greater; I must become less." John realized that he was not the center of the universe. The world does not revolve around him.

I am not the center of the universe. You are not the center of the universe. God is. Jesus is the King. He must become greater. We must become less. In John 3, John compares himself to the friend of the groom, or the best man. What a great analogy. In other words, John knew that he was not meant to be the center of attention, just as the best man or maid of honor should not be the center of attention at a wedding. He was not the main attraction. His job was to bring the bride – God's people – and the bridegroom – Jesus – together; that was his calling and joy. Jesus must occupy center stage; I must not steal His spotlight.

This is so countercultural. We live in a world where every message seems to be about you. You do you. Have it your way. Because you're worth it. Just do it. Look out for number one. All that matters is what you think and what you want and what you feel. You do what you want and don't let anyone else tell you what is right for you. But what do you get in a world where everyone is all about themselves, when everyone thinks that they are the center of the universe? Chaos.

What would it look like for you to truly recognize that the world does not revolve around you but God? That God does not exist to serve you, but you to serve Him? That others do not exist to serve you either? What would it look like to make John 3:30 your life verse, your mantra: **He must become greater; I must become less.**

As Andrew Murray said, "Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all."

Or as Richard Baxter put it: "Lord, what Thou wilt, and when Thou wilt, and how Thou wilt."

What if God calls you to a hard life for His glory? To not achieve your dreams? To not find true love? To struggle? What if your life will include no glory, little worldly success, financial struggle, but through your faith in Jesus and witness to who Jesus is and what He has done, many would be saved? Would you be willing to give it all for His glory? After all, remember John:

Matthew 3:4 - John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

John lived in the desert eating locusts and wild honey, wearing clothing made of camel's hair. Not the most glamorous life, I am sure. But he knew his purpose – it was not about him, but to glorify Jesus and point people to Him, even before he even met him

2) We point people to Jesus by calling them to repentance and faith in Him

Luke 3:7-8 - 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.

While we may be used to baptism, baptism was not something that natural-born Jews ever did. Baptism was for Gentiles converting to Judaism. And so, for John to call Jews to baptism was essentially telling them that their membership in the nation of Israel was insufficient for salvation, that they needed purification.

Luke 3:8-9 - 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. 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.”

John tells the crowd that their heritage will not save them, does not make them right with God. He calls them to be baptized. Some commentators see in this a hearkening back to the Exodus. Remember that when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they walked through the Red Sea into the Promised Land, where they were to form a new nation. But they sinned and fell short of God's plans for them. Now, John calls them to reenact that exodus, going into the water, being cleansed of their sin, and to be a new people for God. Turn from sin and turn to God, producing fruit in keeping with repentance. Show your repentance by good works. He goes on to give them examples of those good works:

Luke 3:10-14 - “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” ¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. ¹⁴ 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.”

Notice that he does not tell the tax collectors or soldiers to leave their jobs, but to be just, to not extort people or mistreat people but to fulfill their jobs with integrity. Notice that repentance includes once again taking oneself out of the center, not using others but instead serving others and pointing people to God. The fruit is reflected in a concern for others and a willingness to meet needs.

John is calling the people to be prepared for the coming of the Lord. Prepare the way for the coming king. And they prepare themselves through repenting of sin and turning back to the Lord, for there will be a coming judgment. He tells them that the true Messiah is coming, who will give them the true baptism:

Luke 3:15-18 - 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.

Again, we point people to Jesus by calling them to repentance and faith in Him. That is how we are saved. That is the consistent witness of Jesus and the apostles:

Matthew 4:17 - From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Luke 24:46–49 - He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Acts 2:37–38 - When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 20:21 - I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

The message is not just God loves you, or God is for you. It is to turn from sin to faith in Jesus, who loves you so much that He gave His life for you. You are not the center of the universe. God does not exist to serve you and bend to your will and bless what you do. You are not God. You do not get to decide what is right and wrong. **To repent is to get off of God's throne and to enthrone Him as Lord.** It is to turn from a self-centered existence to a God-centered existence. It is to be willing to put away sin and rebellion and to trust and obey Him.

It takes courage to proclaim the repentance part of the gospel. It is not a message of “you do you” or that you are God’s perfect masterpiece just the way you are or that God loves you just as you are, so just keeping being your wonderful self. It is a message that proclaims that you are not perfect just the way you are, that the desires of your heart are not pure, that you and I are both part of the problem in this world, and that this not only has terrible consequences this side of eternity but can have disastrous consequences for eternity. And the proper response is NOT to just keep living as you are but to repent, to align yourself under the leadership and lordship of the God who created you and knows how you were created to live.

This is not an easy message to proclaim. Remember that John the Baptist, while not Elijah, came in the spirit of Elijah. Elijah stood up against the prophets of Ba’al and Jezebel and Ahab at the risk of his own life. The prophet is not loved, but is typically hated by people because he tells people that they do not measure up to God’s holy standard, that they need to repent and turn to God and get their lives together. It doesn’t often turn out well for the prophet.

Luke 3:19-20 - But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done,²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

And we read in Matthew 14 that John the Baptist was eventually beheaded by King Herod for confronting him about his sin.

It will not be easy to be a witness. It takes courage to testify about Jesus and to call people to repentance. But God will be with you, and you will be blessed if you are faithful to Him.

Matthew 10:32-33 - “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”

But shouldn't we just keep it to ourselves and not push our faith on others? The Christian faith is not telemarketing; it is the cure for cancer. This is rescue from sin and Hell. This is a relationship with God himself. This is the purpose for which you were created. It would be wrong to keep it to ourselves.

3) Baptism is a public declaration of our repentance and faith

As the crowd comes to John for baptism, he tells them:

Luke 3:16 - 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."

Baptism does not save. But it is an identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Romans 6:1–5 - What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism is a symbolic act by which we identify with Christ's death, dying to our sins and being raised to new life in Christ as our sins are washed away. Unless your sins have been washed away by Jesus, you are still unclean, still separated from a holy God. But in Jesus, there is forgiveness for every sin. If you have not been baptized, then let me know.

Luke 3:21-22 - When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

You are my Son. I love you. I am pleased with you.

When we are in Christ, the Father sees us as He sees His beloved Son. You are His son or daughter. He loves you. And He is well pleased with you.