

# When the Word Breaks the Silence

Bible Verses Mentioned: Luke 3:13, Isaiah 40:3, Malachi, Leviticus, Acts 5

How we doing? Awesome. It's good to see y'all y'all. I know it's a big night around Ortega. And so I really love that everybody's here. The hot chocolate bar a little later. We're going to get sugared up. We ready? All right. I was thinking the other day, I was watching these little kids come out and I was remembering when when my children were really little, did you ever go to those malls where you would have the soft playgrounds? They still do that. Remember, we lived in St.

Louis where I was in seminary and our children were really little. We'd go to this mall in West County and you'd go to these soft playgrounds and they had these kind of corrals around them. But there's these giant bacteria fests where you put your kids in there, but you're so worn out, you don't care. So you just kind of push them in. And there's just herds of children going. And I remember the experience of you're, you know, you're in a mall. So you're you're like watching your child from the side like a like a hawk. I remember my oldest Emmy being wandering through the slides and in and out.

You're trying to follow them. And she thinks she's independent. And all of a sudden, you know, she's playing for about 20 minutes and she sits and she lifts up her head and she realizes, "Wait, where are my parents?" Right? And she gets kind of scared and she looks around and all of a sudden she doesn't realize that she's searching for me, but the truth of the matter is I've been searching for her the entire time that she's in there. And there's not one moment where I had my eye off of her.

And she gets scared, all of a sudden I can come up and I can scoop her up from behind and she said, "Okay, I'm okay." And I was thinking about that story and it reminds me a lot of myself that I can relate to that experience that so much of my life, I've kind of been running around the soft playground of my world, hopefully a little more bacteria free, but running around and kind of getting engaged in my own life. And as I go and I do the things that I do, I get busy with the things that I want to get busy with.

And then all of a sudden, I can come to the end of my day and I can lift my eyes and I can realize I haven't thought about God once. And I'm in the God business. Like, I can lift my eyes and I can, ugh, I get this sense of dread or something tragic happens in my life or something hard happens in my life. And I lift my eyes and I've been in my own world. I'm like, wait, where is God in all this? And I kind of get scared and I'm like, Lord, where are you? Where are you in the mix of everything?

And I feel like I'm searching for God and how do I get to Him and He's just beyond my reach. But much like that soft playground, it's really God who is constantly searching for us. He's constantly got His eye on me. And in that moment, when I lift my eyes, it's really a matter of me realizing that the Lord has never left me at any point in that whole scenario. Now, the passage we read today about John the Baptist and the Word of the Lord coming to him, it really speaks to the center of that.

And I want to unpack that a little bit today. It's kind of a famous passage you hear around Christmas. And I want to walk through, which is Bible preaching style, chapter 3, verse 1. It says, "In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod being the tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother, Philip, is the Tetrarch of Echuria. And Lisanus, the Tetrarch of Abilene, and the High Priest was Anice and Caiaphas. And Luke is going into all these details, right?"

And usually when you read passages like this, what do you do? Fast forward, like you can't do it, right? It gets really boring. But he's putting this stuff in here for a reason. And Luke is going into the specific details for a reason. It's kind of like if I were trying to tell you where to go on a map and I were giving you the coordinates and I'm saying you want to go to this many degrees latitude, this many degrees longitude by this many seconds or this many minutes or whatever it is that pinpoint something really specific on a map.

What Luke is doing here is he is trying to provide historical coordinates. And what he's doing is he's placing John the Baptist and subsequently Jesus on the historical timeline around 28, 29 BC or AD, rather when this

is happening. Right. And that's just not some nerdy Bible fact, right? Because it matters to us. And what he's saying here is that John the Baptist wasn't a legend.

He wasn't just this figment of our sort of cumulative religious imagination. He wasn't some caricature of religious principles that we came up with, or he wasn't an amalgamation of different kind of heroes that lived during the time. He was a historical reality that lived at a specific point on a specific timeline. And that is true. And Jesus was the same way. So what he's doing is he's saying this really happened. He's giving an eyewitness account.

And the reason that matters beyond just the historical reality of it, and the reason that's important is that you and I, we have human stories. I have a real-life human story with real-life human needs. And I need a God that is really relevant to that story. I don't need a God that is a bunch of religious concepts swept together in this personification of some guy that died 2000 years ago.

I need a God that moves and that is relevant, that has skin in the game. And so when Luke's doing this, that's what he's doing. He's saying, look, this isn't just something we created. This actually happened and it's actually relevant to you because your story and His story overlap, right? So it keeps going. Verse 2, "The Word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness." And here's where we get to meet this wild man.

His name is John the Baptizer. And he's pretty famous. He's the son of Zechariah who was the priest in the temple. And Zechariah was married to Elizabeth. And Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest. And Elizabeth and Zechariah were really holy and righteous people. They lived a good life. And it was pleasing to the Lord, but they had a problem. They couldn't have children. And during that time, as you know, if you couldn't have children, that was a sign that you had been cursed from the Lord.

And they were living, they were faithfully, constantly praying for this over and over again, but they couldn't have it. And Elizabeth, who was also sidebar, was the Elizabeth was the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. And so they prayed and they prayed and they prayed. It was this, their story kind of had echoes of Abraham and Sarah. And one day, Zechariah was chosen to go into the temple and burn some incense. And he goes in and the angel of the Lord comes in and he says, "Hey, you're going to have a baby." And this baby is going to be special.

We've heard your prayer and you're going to name him John. And he's been favored by the Lord. And this baby, he's going to be filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb. That's a profound statement. This baby in his mother's womb would be filled with the Holy Spirit. A couple of side notes on that. Only people can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Only image bearers of God can be filled with the Holy Spirit.

So this unborn child, this person, this image bearer that was filled with the Holy Spirit that was in Elizabeth. Later, when Mary visits him, visits, it says that the baby leapt in his womb and her womb, that the first person to recognize the incarnate Jesus was an unborn child. It's a beautiful picture. So John was special and he was born and he was kind of weird.

He was kind of weird. And the Lord said, "You're going to set him apart." And what we're going to do is I want you to keep him according to this Nazarite vow. He's never to have any alcohol. And when he got older, he began to live a weird life. He began to flee into the wilderness. And he dressed in camel's hair and he ate locusts dipped in honey. In verse 2, it says, "The Word of the Lord or the Word of God came to John." Now, this was an epic statement.

It was an epic statement because the last time the Word of the Lord came to anybody was 460 years ago. The book of Malachi, you know, the last book of the Old Testament? That's the last person the Word of the Lord had come to. When you hear the Word of the Lord comes to someone in the Bible, that's prophet talk. So that means the person that God is speaking to is a prophet. So 460 years, He speaks to John the Baptist, John the Baptist.

And if you are a first-century Jewish person and you are leaning in because you are waiting for the Lord to come to somebody because you haven't heard for so long and the Romans have invaded and you are just waiting, you're leaning in. And all of a sudden, through John the Baptist, God breaks the silence. This is a

huge moment. And it's significant because John was the bridge. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. And he was the first of the New Testament prophets.

And the vehicle by which God was ushering in this new era and also fulfilling a prophecy by sending this herald. But what I think is cool and what I find the most interesting thing in this passage is not just who John was, but where he was when the Word of the Lord came to Him. It says that He was in the wilderness. Now why does that matter? The wilderness, if you are a first-century Jewish person, is not like the way you think of wilderness.

It's not where you went to go have a getaway and take selfies on the Blue Ridge Parkway. It's not a place where you would go and collect your thoughts or it was in a peaceful place. To a first-century Jewish person, the wilderness was a picture of total chaos. The wilderness was where Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years. The wilderness was where Jesus went to face Satan. It was where Leviticus said that the demons would dwell.

It represented being lost. It represented spiritual turmoil. It represented confusion and abandonment. I love the way that what's his name? Rich Lambert. If you, by the way, we're handing out these devotionals, these advent devotional books in the back. I encourage you to get one. And this is a quote that I read from it by this Rich Lambert. It says, "The wilderness was the opposite of Eden. Wilderness is the garden uprooted.

The garden tossed. The garden lost and in ruins. And if the garden was the setting for humanity and innocence, the wilderness is the setting for humanity after the fall. Pretty heavy. So why does that matter for us? When you read in this passage, he continues, he quotes Isaiah 40:3, and it says he's talking about John. He says, "He's a voice of one crying in the wilderness." And yes, he's talking about the literal wilderness that John was in, but it's also He's speaking about a bigger wilderness.

He's saying He's a voice in the wilderness of this whole world that we live in. This sinsick, sin-shattered world is the wilderness. And he's also talking about our hearts. He's saying our hearts, they are uprooted. They are places of chaos. They're set places that were meant for peace but have been wrecked by sin and that were uprooted. And John the Baptist was called to speak into that very place. Now, of course, we don't see it that way.

I don't see when I step outside of my life or I consider my day or even my own heart, I don't think about it as a wilderness because, you know, I'm so used to it. And I walk into my days and I know my home. I know the way that my life works. And I've kind of dressed it up a little bit. We've hung curtains in the wilderness, right? It's true. We make it feel like it's our own. We've made it our own space.

But the Lord comes and He tries to arouse us to this reality that those things, that brokenness and those scars and those pains, those pains that we carry that we let define us now, that we've just resigned ourselves. So that's just the way it is. God's saying, "No." Because the good news for us is that it was in the wilderness that God revealed Himself. It was in the wilderness that God revealed Himself to Moses.

It was in the wilderness that God revealed Himself to Elijah, and He would meet Elijah. And it was in the wilderness where God where the Word of the Lord came to John the Baptist. In the wilderness, it's not evidence of God's absence. It's the arena in which He moves. So verse 3, "The Word of the Lord moved through John as he went into the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So what John is doing here is he's saying, "Hey, something big is coming." And in order for you, I don't want you to miss it.

There's another one coming. Do you remember he says the straps of his sandals, I'm not worthy to untie? And he's saying that there's something coming. I need you to prepare your hearts. And if you don't prepare your hearts, you're going to miss it. And the way I want you to prepare your hearts, the way you're going to be able to see Him, it's going to be the lens that's going to allow you to see Him. It's this thing called repentance. That's a loaded word, isn't it? Especially in the South. It's one of those words you see spray painted on like plywood on the side of the highway.

Repent. Repent. Turn or burn. It sounds really, really scary in a Southern accent. So what does it mean? Is it just feeling bad for your sins? Is it just stop doing what you're doing? Maybe a little bit, but it's so much

bigger than that. When you read it through the lens of Scripture, see, repentance, it's a heart posture. It's a heart posture that allows me to see myself as I truly am, like where I am.

Repentance is the thing that allows me to see my sin for what it truly is. It allows me to see Jesus for who He is. And when I repent, it's not just about what I'm turning away from in my sin, but it's really more about what I'm turning towards. I'm turning towards the Father. I'm turning towards Jesus. Let me give you an example. A bunch of years ago, when I was in college, I took a semester off and I went, I did this wilderness course for about three months, which is totally crazy.

You asked me about. I'll tell you, but it's great. But I went on this one section for about two weeks. We went caving and they said that we were in Nevada and they had these just miles of caves underground. And I was with some of my buddies on this trip and I had my overalls and I had we had these headlamps that you would use because caves are dark, as you can imagine. But these were old school headlamps. They had they had cobalt gas that was going through them and they had literal flames that would flicker against a mirror. So it's old school. I'm not sure why they did it. It sounds kind of dangerous, but that's what we did.

And I remember I was crawling through this tunnel and it was very narrow. It was on my side. This sounds like if you're claustrophobic, you would hate this. And I was crawling through through this tunnel into this room and I had my headlamp on and I walk into I come into the room and it was a kind of a cavernous room and I look up and all of a sudden I see the walls and I look up. There's something funny on the ceiling and my light hits the ceiling and I realize the ceiling's moving. And it was bats.

And all of a sudden the ceiling peeled off and all these bats came and they had one way out and it was in the tunnel that I was currently laying in. And they went and I put my head down and they all flew over. It was like a vampire movie. They all went over my head. Well, in the process, I freaked out and I'm doing all this. I knocked my headlamp off. So all of a sudden I'm laying on the ground and I begin to and I open my eyes and I can't see a thing. It's blacker than black. It's fully the absence of light.

And I began to feel a way I began to feel around on the ground. I found my headlamp. I was able to light it again. And all of a sudden I began to see the room again. And I could see the bats and I could see where I was positioned and I could begin to turn around and I could see the way out and I could see the circle of light. And all of a sudden I was like, OK, I knew the way home. The thing about that light when I was in that tunnel is it didn't create anything in that tunnel that wasn't already there.

It just allowed me to see it. It allowed me to see where I was. It allowed me to see where those bats were. It allowed me to see how to get away from them, right? When sin enters the world and when sin, when we are born into sin, Scripture says that we are born into darkness, that our hearts are black. And it's like in that cave that my lamp is knocked out. It is a total absence of light.

I have no capacity to see God. I have no capacity to really see myself for what I truly am for what I'm doing because I can't see God. I can't see, I can't see where I am. And I've lived in this, we've lived in this for so long, it just feels normal. And the pain and the suffering that we experience, we have a longing for something we just can't wrap words around, right? We have a longing for things. We start searching, we feel around in the dark, but I have no ability to really orient myself.

And in fact, the more I try to create light on my own, the more darkness I produce. But God is not content. He's not content to leave us as prisoners in these bat cave sin lives that we have, these sort of bat-filled lives that we have. And he calls us to repent. And He's saying, "Open your eyes so you can see where you are, the desperation of your sin. Quit crawling deeper into these caves.

Turn to Jesus." That sounds great. But we just said just a second ago, like, I don't have the ability, I can open my eyes all I want, but I don't have the ability to generate that repentance in my own heart. If I could only put that lens down and see myself as I need to see Him, or see God as I need to see Him, or see my sin for what it is, I'm too immersed in the darkness. What am I supposed to do? What can I do on my own?

Nothing. There's nothing I can do on my own. I can't generate light. But that's why this passage that we just read is so beautiful, because it was the Word of the Lord that came to John in the wilderness. God was the

primary mover there, not John. God was what moved through John when He called people to repentance so that He would move in their hearts so they could do that very thing.

Acts chapter 5, Acts chapter 11, it says that even our ability to repent is a gift from God. Even our ability to repent. When you feel the weight of your sin and your life, when you've done that thing, we've all done it. You know those things that you're immersed in and you've spent and you're just like that nausea over yourself. You laugh. It's true though. You know what I'm talking about. That's God moving.

You know when you begin to see things for what they are, it's the Lord moving. He's beginning to turn on the lights so we can see. Jesus said, what? I am the light of the world, right? I could see the thing I've immersed in. And I could turn around in the passage. And I could see the ring of light at the end of the tunnel that I can move towards Jesus because Jesus is also the way, the truth, and the life. He's the passage and my destination.

The two things I want you to see about repentance. I said it in the beginning, I'll say it again. The power of my repentance, it isn't in what I'm turning away from. It's what I'm turning towards. The story of the prodigal son, the goal of the prodigal son story was not to get the kid out of the pigsty. The goal of the prodigal son story was to get him into his father's arms. It was that the power of repentance is not about what he's turning away from. It's what he's turning towards.

And the second thing I'll say about the repentance is this, is that when it allows us to see the lamp, we begin to see ourselves in that cave. It does not create anything that wasn't already there. When I repent, it's not like a bat signal that I send up that makes Jesus come rushing in. It gives me it's not something that's like a dog whistle that makes the Holy Spirit come. My repentance allows me.

It's a product of the Holy Spirit already moving in my life, but it allows me the freedom and the vision to see the Jesus who is already standing in front of me. The Word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness. And if the Word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness, the Word of the Lord is going to come to you in our wilderness. And He has. And there's so many ways that He has provided for us to come and to see that. That's you, Mom. You can turn that off.

I know you're ringtone. You're hilarious. And this matters because of this. Just like my daughter or my children looking for me in the soft playground, right? When we realize that and we stand in that truth, when she was looking for me in the saw playground, there was no chance that she was lost because I was watching her the whole time. I was constantly searching for her.

In the same way, when we repent, we can do it with expectant hearts knowing that our Father in Heaven was the one that stirred that repentance in us, and that it is Jesus who stands before us, and He takes us by the hand to lead us out of the wilderness, out of the cave, back into the life that He created us to live. Amen. Amen.