

Sermon 21.12.12

Isaiah 40: 3-5

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Luke 3: 1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

John said 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? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

SERMON:

It's easy for us to overlook, skim past the opening verses in our reading today that start-

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the regions of Ituraea (It-yur-ee-ah) and Trachonitis (track-on -eye-tis), and Lysanias (lie-sane-ee-us) ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (Luke 3: 1-2)

But let's take a closer look, for Luke included this litany of people in this story for a reason.

Luke sets the stage for John the Baptist's prophetic call by introducing a list of the greatest Earthly Powers of their time: an emperor, a governor, three local leaders, and two high priests. Together they represent the rulers of the known world and the religious, political, and economic complex that stands at the heart of Jerusalem.

It's to this world - one held captive by the domination and influence of the powerful - it's to this world that God sends the Messiah.

But the word of God does not come to any of those influential men, nor to the political territories they command. It comes instead to a lone man out in the wilderness: John, son of Zechariah.¹

God uses John, called to the wilderness, to serve.

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-31-6-5>

According to Luke, great crowds stream into the desert to get yelled at by John. Why? Why are they willing — no, *eager* — to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What attracts them?

A clue lies in the question they ask John at the conclusion of his sermon. "What should we do?"

What should we do... it's asked 3 times.

BB Part 1:

In 1993, At the age of 36, Betty Bigombe² moved home - back to the place of her birth in northern Uganda...

She had been a government minister, living comfortably in the capital with her 2 young children, but she was dis-satisfied with her work. In an unheard of move, she resigned because her work wasn't action oriented enough. She wanted to make a difference, not do crossword puzzles in the office, but to work toward change.

What should we do? The crowds asked John, the prophet.

That's not necessarily a question people ask when things are going well, writes author Debie Thomas³. It's the question we ask when we're seeking - seeking for something - when our defenses are down, when our lives are splitting at the seams.

It's what we ask when we're weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate.

"What should we do?"

And so Betty Bigombe was sent to the wilderness, tasked with convincing the guerilla rebels of the [Lord's Resistance Army](#) (LRA) to put down their weapons.

Betty moved to the camps in Gulu, Northern Uganda, going to live in a war zone, going with the vision of helping her people live in dignity, seeking to find a way out of this war that had been raging for years.

Betty expected to be welcomed home - but instead she was dismissed.

Recognizing that she needed to build their trust, She chose to live in the squalor of the camps for nearly a year. It was the sight of emaciated children, those dying from starvation, that spiritually wrenched her - inspired her to stay and work toward change.

²<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/face-to-face-with-the-enemy/id1561860622?i=1000543811939>

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do>

"What should we *do*?"

Is this a question we're asking during this Advent season? As we wait in the darkness, as we look forward with hope? Are we engaging in the kind of self-reflection that leads to action?

Or are we complacent and sluggish?

Are we flocking, like the crowds in John's story, towards genuine repentance and change?

John's answer to the crowd's question provides a second clue. Imagine him if you will — a wild beast of a man, ascetic and rough. Dressed in camel's hair and fueled by locusts. What do the crowds think such a fringe character will say in answer to their question? "Abandon your homes and families?" "Dwell in the desert?" "Start a revolution?"

John's answer is a radical one - but not one we might expect:

What should you do? *You should go home.*

Go home to your families, your neighbors, your colleagues, *your life*. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is far away from the nitty-gritty dailiness of your particular life.

Instead of waiting for a holy someday that will never come, inhabit the stuff of your life as deeply and as generously as you can right now.

Inhabit the stuff of your life...

For Betty Bigombe it took time. In those camps, she developed a culture of listening - encouraging stories to be told and honored. She lived with her people. When they were hungry, she was hungry. When they felt threatened, so did she. She knew she couldn't necessarily save them, but she could give them hope.

Betty realized that to make any substantial move toward peace, she needed to meet with Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance army (LRA) - a man she viewed as a monster.

She wrote Kony a letter, referring to him as her son, appealing to their united belief in the same God, asking to meet.

It was by using his language, Kony's language of faith, that she forged a connection with this brutal leader. She told him that while she was a government official, she was also his mother.

"A mother provides protection, she explained. If I call you my son, that means I'm going to protect you. Here I am, your mother. All I want is for people to be safe and live in dignity." Even though she knew Kony was responsible for countless atrocities, Betty chose not to treat him like the enemy. She used the language of a mother, not a militant, to reach him.

Kony responded to this approach, eventually agreeing to peace talks.

Over many months and meetings, just when it appeared peace had been reached, the fragile agreement dissolved and the rebels again attacked.

Betty was devastated and stepped away from this work, overwhelmed.

Fast forward 10 years, to 2004, where Betty is now working for the world bank. Out of the blue, while watching a CNN news broadcast referring to the ongoing civil war in Uganda, Betty felt a calling; a calling back home.

She quit her job and returned to northern Uganda, again throwing herself into the work of peace. Over the next 2 years Betty continued, never able to get a peace agreement signed. But the LRA agreed to give up nearly all their weapons and land and considerably shrunk in size. A fragile victory.

In our scripture today,

John the Baptist is telling those hungry for change -

Instead of waiting for a holy someday that will never come, inhabit the stuff of your life as deeply and as generously as you can right now.

Share now.

Be merciful now.

Do justice now.

Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous, how routine. Why? Because the holy ground that matters most is the ground beneath your feet.

To the tax collectors, John says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

To the soldiers: "Don't extort money by threats or false accusations; be satisfied with your wages."

To everyone who has *anything*: "You have gifts to give. So stop hoarding. Stop procrastinating. Stop making excuses. The day of repentance is now." Repentance, metanoia, change. We keep coming back to that call in the gospels. Repent, turn, change your mind, your way of being. Now.

'What then should we do?'

Go home - to do the work; live out your response to God's invitation to transformation.

What does this mean?

It means we have work to do — work so ordinary, it will almost definitely disappoint us.

Ordinary work. God's work.

I wonder how those tax collectors felt the next time they headed out to collect money. Wait, God's kingdom is *here*? Here in this hated profession? God cares how I live *here*?

Yes. Yes, God cares how we live here. At home, in the ordinariness of our lives.

Betty Bigombe's story is not one of an ordinary life.

But it's one where she took seriously the call to 'go home - live your life - find ways to answer that haunting question: What then shall we do?

For Betty, it was the act of listening and showing a fierce love toward Kony that brought about change.

Listening and loving - the keys to transformation.

I wonder if John the Baptist has good news for us today.

Go home. Live your lives - your everyday, run of the mill, ordinary lives.

Look at the ways you spend your money - does it support businesses that matter? Do your spending habits make others' lives better?

Look at the ways you spend your time - does it lead to deeper connections with God and others?

God cares.

God cares how I, how we, live our lives. How we live into the small decisions that make up our days.

Go home, to this already but not yet space - Emmanuel, God with us.

I'm no John the Baptist. I may not call you a brood of vipers. But I ask you to join me in stepping into the waters of transformation and consider what it means to live into the questions surrounding

What then...

What then shall we do?