

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Luke 3:7-17

Sermon Title: "Lifeless Stones Turned Faithful Disciples"

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John the Baptist always seems to be an angry individual. Whenever an actor portrays him, John the Baptist always comes off as a wild man with wild hair and crazy eyes. He wears coarse and shaggy clothing, and he is always foaming at the mouth. If all we ate day and night were locusts and honey, maybe we too would go a little crazy. John talks about broods of vipers, spitting out the words as he says them. He mentions axes at the foot of trees and fire burning away the unwanted chaff. He always seems to be an angry individual.

John the Baptist is the older cousin to Jesus, older by about six months. John is called to be the herald of the King, the one who prepares the way of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah talks about John the Baptist as the one who makes straight the paths, and boy, does John mean to straighten out a number of people by what he preaches next to the Jordan River. Make the crooked places straight and make the rough ways smooth, before all flesh sees the arrival of the Salvation of

God.<sup>1</sup> “You brood of vipers,” John the Baptist says to the crowds. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is coming?”<sup>2</sup> I am warning you, John could have said. I am telling you how crooked and reckless you are.

For example, he says, Don’t think that, because you are a Jew, you are going to escape God’s wrath. Don’t say, “Well I am a descendant of Abraham, and thus a child of Abraham, and so I am exempt from any danger that is coming.”<sup>3</sup> Racial distinction will save nobody, whether they call themselves a Jew or a Christian.<sup>4</sup> Don’t think that going to church and filling a pew every Sunday will save us from God’s wrath. In the Roman Catholic Church it is called “fulfilling your weekly duty of attending worship.” Some Presbyterians and Protestants might think the same way: “Well, I am here; isn’t that good enough?” According to John the Baptist fulfilling a “duty” doesn’t save anybody.

“God may raise up stones and call them sons and daughters of Abraham,” John says. God can fashion stones and rocks and have them fill the pews of churches, allowing them to “fulfill their weekly duty of attending worship.” John is saying that there is no

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Luke 3:5-6 and Isaiah 40:3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:7.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:8.

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, cf. 29.

difference between the person who assumes that they are faithful to God without doing anything and a rock that just sits there all day. Faithfulness is not found in filling a pew or calling ourselves something that sounds nice. It is in the carrying out of whatever God wants us to do, bearing the good fruit that God gives us to share with others. If we bear God's good fruit, no axe will ever be able to cut us down.

John the Baptist always seems to be an angry individual. Instead of reading the passages in Luke from this idea that John is crazy-mad, foaming at the mouth, let us try to read John as a man who knows something important and cannot wait to let it out.

Back in Luke 1, John's mother, Elizabeth, was pregnant with him. Mary, the mother of Jesus, comes to visit. When Elizabeth sees her cousin, she practically tackles Mary at the doorway. She knows that Mary is pregnant with the Savior of the world. She is overjoyed to know that God has answered people's prayers and is now sending the Salvation of the world. "Blessed are you amongst women," Elizabeth says, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb." But not only that: the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at the presence of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Luke tells us that while John the Baptist was *in vitro*, he

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Luke 1:41.

was excited about the arrival of the Savior, and he couldn't contain that excitement but had to kick and punch. We can only wonder what Elizabeth was feeling, as the baby inside was going nuts.

Imagine John the Baptist this way: as a man who is still excited. He has lived all his life waiting for Jesus to reveal himself as the Savior and Lord of all. He baptizes people in the Jordan River in the hope to see Jesus, some day, coming off a hill and coming down to the waters to take John's place. He wants people to know that the Savior and Lord is arriving soon. He wants them to feel the same joy and thrill that he feels. When people don't get what we are saying or feeling, we can get a little annoyed and we may talk even louder and with more animation. Think of John this way: as the prophet setting the path for Jesus to take, and he wants to be on that path along with everyone else.

Also imagine John the Baptist as the guy who doesn't want people to perish. He might talk about wrath and call people "a brood of vipers." He might mention axes that are ready to cut and fires that are ready to burn, but John is not a man who wishes for such things to happen. He is not rubbing his hands together and laughing a sinister laugh (Muhah-haha!), waiting for people to mess up. If he did, he

wouldn't have taken on the role of being the one crying out in the wilderness. He wouldn't have chosen to call people's attention to repent of their sins, turn the other direction away from them, and notice that Somebody great and wonderful coming their way. Somebody is arriving, who would save us from axes and fire and death itself. John the Baptist is anxious and excited about his cousin, our Savior, and he wants us to be just as anxious and excited.

People are coming to the Jordan River to receive a sacrament of Baptism, but once they leave the waters they should live in such a way that shows that the baptismal waters have affected them. In other words, they should be different people coming out of the water than when the first entered it. So John, anxious and excited as he is, gives some sound advice.

“The one who has two tunics, you should give one to the person who has no tunics.” A tunic could be seen as an undergarment (underwear) or as an outer garment like a robe. John offers sound advice as we read it – it makes perfect sense to give something to somebody, especially if they have none and we have more than enough. No problem there, right?

But people like to keep their two tunics, or three cars, or forty pairs of shoes, or fifty dollars in their pocket. They don't want to give anything away. They

keep more than they need because of some rainy day that might come, or because they might lose what they have someday, or because they just love to see their homes filled with stuff. They want to buy more stuff for themselves, so their homes can be ever more packed. John the Baptist says, "Give one tunic. Just one." Let go of selfishness. Let go of the silly excuses for why we have to keep so much in our possession. Think of others' needs, and allow generosity to guide our hearts. We may realize that we can spare one or two things to help others, and thus we act out our faithfulness toward God.

Tax collectors were hated during the time of John the Baptist. They worked for the Roman, foreign government, and if that wasn't bad enough they became rich off of the tax obligation of others. Everyone had to pay Roman taxes and that could be a large chunk of change. The Roman government needed people to collect the tax, but the government didn't care if the tax collectors took extra money from taxpayers to supplement their income. So, for an example, tax collectors would say people owed 25% to the government, when in fact the government only wanted 15%. The tax collectors would get rich off the extra 10%. So people hated them for what they did.

We don't know what John the Baptist personally

thought of them, but he says to the tax collectors, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”<sup>6</sup> Do not add more to the already-heavy tax burden. Make a living but not to the point of making others poor.

In the previous statement, John says that we should not burden people by refusing to give them something. In this statement, John wants us not to burden people by taking something from them. If we run a business, let it be a fair business. If we have certain relationships with others, may they be fair relationships. Take nothing from somebody for our own benefit.

When I was serving in a church in Arizona as a student intern, I once knew a man who was the president of a local bank, and then became a top executive when that bank was bought out by Bank of America. This is how our conversations would normally go: “How was your day?” he would ask; “I had a pretty good...” I would try to say. “And what sort of ministry do you carry out in the church?” “Well, mainly toward the youth...” “And how many youth normally come to the church?” “I would say about twenty or so....” “Of all ages?” “Yes.” (I actually got to complete that sentence.) “And what do those youth do?” “Well, they attend Sunday School and youth group...” “And what do they do in these groups?” And

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:13.

on and on it would go. He would never allow me to finish those sentences.

I knew the man, only because he thought I could somehow get his teenage daughter to youth group by my own influence. That never happened for various reason, one of which being that this man never turned off the high-powered executive switch when he came home. He rarely talked with his daughter, and when he did it was the same way he spoke to me. If you cannot get a word in edgewise, you don't want to be around such people. In business and in relationships, don't take away from people all you can get. John the Baptist wished for tax collectors and for us all not to burden people by taking something from them, and thus we prove our faithfulness toward God.

To the soldiers John the Baptist says, "Do not intimidate anyone. Do not falsely accuse. Be content with your pay." People are not called to serve in the military alone. We Christians are always called into service, because we are disciples of Christ and servants of our God, and much can be done for God's kingdom.

Roman soldiers were called to certain towns to keep the peace. They might have kept the peace at the end of a sharp sword or spear, but keep the peace was their call. Do not stir up trouble but lessen it, when



trouble arises. Our call is the same: keep the peace. Not by violence or the possibility of violence do we keep the peace, but by our calming presence, by our encouraging demeanor. St. Francis of Assisi once prayed a prayer that I have hanging on my office wall. He said, "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy." Be agents of peace that bring about God's good order from chaos. God gives us the hearts to find the good in all situations. God gives us the mind to communicate goodness, so we may all live at peace. Thus, we show our faithfulness toward God.

Don't be lazy and unfeeling like stones, John the Baptist proclaims. Act out this exciting faith that God gives us through Christ. Prepare the way of the Lord, and watch the Lord do great things.

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher of the 1800s, puts it this way, "Have I been making a fair show in the flesh without having a corresponding inner life?" Do I think myself to be a faithful towards God, when in fact nothing within me shows that I am? "If my heart remains unsoftened and unfertilized by grace [as John the Baptist puts it, if my heart remains

as stone,] the good seed may germinate for a season, but it must ultimately wither... Good growth takes place upwards and downwards at the same time... above all let me feel the energy of [the] Holy Spirit, and then I shall possess [a living and faithfully] enduring seed in my soul.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Morning & Evening: King James Version*, 22.