

A Strong Voice Luke 3:1-20

Not to be confused with Billy Graham the WWE wrestler of the same name evangelist Billy Graham has been speaking to crowds for nearly eight decades. His ministry began in 1947 reaching audiences by way of open air crusades, television and radio. During that time he would conduct 400 crusades in 185 countries on 6 continents. As of 2008 it is estimated that 2.2 billion people have heard his message. Of that number, his staff reports that 3.2 million have responded to the gospel. His has been a simple message to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior.

Grant Wacker reports: By the middle 1970s, many deemed him "America's pastor".

His message was simple. His message was direct. His message was effective. Of the numbers of people who went forward making decisions to follow Christ who were sincere, only God knows. He has been the voice crying in the wilderness calling people to turn to God, calling people in a nation that deems itself religious to repent. His was a fiery message with a burning zeal. He never apologized for his message. He never compromised his message. He never changed his message. Always the same, he pointed people to the Messiah.

In our passage today, Luke sums up that voice which preceded the Messiah's coming. Turn with me in your Bible's to **Luke 3:1-20** where we will take a look at a strong voice.

It was a prophetic word
It was a public warning
It was a personal witness

I. IT WAS A PROPHETIC WORD – v. 1-6

As a historian, Luke sets the stage for John's ministry by including reference to political and religious leaders. It not only helps us understand the timeframe in which his ministry began, it also

helps us see the political and religious unrest that was present when John stepped out of his seclusion to begin the fulfillment of his calling that was foretold at his birth.

Luke 1:14-17

When John was born Caesar Augustus was emperor of the Roman Empire. When he began his public ministry, the emperor was Tiberius Caesar. He began his reign in 16 AD following two years of being co-regent with Augustus. Tiberius was the step-son of Augustus. He was considered a great general but came to be known as dark and reclusive. History says he was brilliant but brutal, inhumane and profane.

Luke also notes for us that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He began his rule just before John came on the scene.

Following the death of Herod the Great, the territory was divided into three regions. Two of his sons ruled over two regions while the third was given to a man we know little about. Herod Antipas was the ruler over the region where John would minister.

Included in this description are the names of two High Priests. They are Annas and Caiaphas. Now you might be asking yourselves why two High Priests? I thought the law specifically called for only one High Priest and you would be correct. Annas had been High Priest up to 15AD when Roman government deposed him in favor of Caiaphas who was the son-in-law of Annas. So why then does Luke include both names? That's a good question. For the sake of legality, Caiaphas was the one recognized as High Priest by Rome. They thought he was a more pliable person who could bring some semblance of order between Israel and Rome. But the real power and voice that Jews recognized was Annas. He was the one they turned to for spiritual matters. Yet both are involved in the

trial of Jesus and then later when Peter and John stand before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4.

But let me add this about them. While they were the spiritual leaders of the land and were supposed to be the representative of God in respect to the Law, they were wolves in sheep's clothing. They were cunning and deceitful. They made themselves rich on the offerings given to the Temple.

It's unfortunate that we see the same thing today among spiritual leaders. Whether it's the likes of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker who promised God's untold blessings if listeners would send in donations to their ministries or Oral Roberts asking for donations to build his religious empire, there have been many charlatans fleecing people in the name of God while putting on a good religious front.

The religious climate in John's day was devoid of real heart commitment. It was laced with legalism. It was into this political and religious hotbed that John had been called.

We read in our text that **“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.”** Let me just pause here and remind you that Zechariah had been a priest. He had served in the Temple. As a son of a priest John had the right to also serve in the Temple, to take his place among the religious servants of God and perform his duties twice a year. Yet he chose to ignore that role despising the very legalistic nature of the law that once stood as a beacon of hope for the Jew. He did not want to become a part of a corrupt society and so he chose to live in the wilderness. John's wilderness training had come to an end. Like other Old Testament prophets, the word of God came to him to deliver to Israel.

We need to pause and ask ourselves if John's message would have been as effective had he chosen to remain in the hallowed, sterile halls of the Temple? Would the voice have been as candid and

condemning? Would it have pointed to Messiah? Yes he had every right to take the mantle of his father and join the ranks of priests, but instead he chose to live like his predecessor, the prophet Elijah. He dressed similarly, his living conditions were the same and his message pointed to the coming Messiah. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He may have been branded as an odd, eccentric hermit whose message was bold and radical and yet we find that crowds of all sizes came to hear him. How unusual that instead of him going to them, somehow word about this prophet reached the surrounding towns and they went out to see him in the region of the Jordan River. It was the last place of ministry for Elijah, the place where the chariot of fire swooped down and ushered him directly into God's presence.

This particular region was considered a wilderness. It was uninhabited. Scholars tell us that there was no more barren wilderness than this area of Judea. **Matthew 3:1** describes it as a desert. One author called it a “howling barrenness” suggesting that if you took the sterility of the Sahara Desert and Death Valley and multiplied it by a factor of four you would get a sense of what this harsh and unforgiving environment was like. Yet it was here that multitudes gathered to listen to this prophet. **What drew them?** It certainly wasn't the location. **Was it his oddity or peculiarity? Was it his message?** It certainly was different than the message they heard from the religious establishment in the synagogue.

Perhaps the location was a way to symbolize the spiritual wilderness that Israel had found itself. The spiritual condition of the heart was a barren wasteland, devoid of any spiritual fire or fruit. People were going through the motions of religious rituals, doing what they were told because that is what would bring merit with God. And it's no different today. We have a plethora of resources at our disposal but there is a spiritual barrenness in the land, a dryness to worship. Though songs of praise

are sung, it is as if the voice is mute. Though acts of service are displayed, it's as if people are lame. Though Bibles are read, it's as if people are blind. Though preaching is abundant, it is as if people are deaf. Churches are full but lives are empty. Our nation is in a spiritual wilderness.

Several thousand years earlier the nation of Israel crossed that very river to enter the Promised Land. John was calling them again to the Jordan River to cross into the Promised Land of God's Kingdom.

Just like all the Prophets of earlier days, John received the word of God to give to people, a message of utmost urgency and importance. As our text says he came **“preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”**

Baptism was not unknown to the Jews. When a Gentile wanted to follow the Jewish law, they went through a water baptism that would “cleanse” them from their old way of life and bring them into Judaism. Now John was asking the Jews to be baptized. Like baptism today, the baptism of John did not save.

Luke quotes from **Isaiah 40:3-5**. It speaks about the prophetic voice that would echo in the desert. It is a message that would be for both Jew and Gentile. It is a message of salvation. Prepare the way of the Lord by making paths straight for Him. Fill all the valleys, make every mountain low, make crooked roads straight and rough ways smooth.

That makes no sense to us. Yet in that day they would have understood exactly what was meant. Whenever a king was going to travel to another city a work crew would go before his royal caravan and do exactly what is suggested in the passage. If there were potholes in the road they would get filled and rocks would be removed. Where there were ruts in the road, they would get smoothed over. Where the road dipped, it would be filled in. Where there was a hill, it would be topped off. Where the road was

crooked it was made as straight as possible. All this was done in order to make the trip easier. Everything was done in an effort to prepare the way for the king.

In a prophetic voice, John was to smooth out the path for the coming Messiah, the one who would be King. Hearts that were hard were to be softened. Character and conduct that was crooked were to be made straight. John was to prepare the spiritual way for the coming King. This would be done through repentance and forgiveness of sin. His voice would show them a need for a Savior, the One who was coming. This Savior was not just for the Jew, He would also be for the Gentile – **“all mankind will see God's salvation.”**

Now, before we move on I want to speak briefly about the repentance John preached. Webster's defines repentance as being penitent; a feeling of sorrow especially for wrongdoing; remorse. They go on to say that it is to feel such regret or dissatisfaction over some past action as to change one's mind about; to feel so contrite over one's sins as to change or decide to change one's ways.

The Old Testament uses two words to refer to repentance. First, it was a word that meant to pant, sigh or groan. It then came to mean to grieve or lament. When it was in reference to God it was associated with His compassion and sympathy. When Scripture states that God repented, it does not mean that He sinned and was confessing, it means that He looked on the plight of man and sympathized with them in their plight. When the word was used in reference to a person's character it meant to rue hence to repent.

Here's what the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* has to say: **“This word is translated "repent" about 40 times in the Old Testament, and in nearly all cases it refers to God. The principal idea is not personal relation to sin, either in its experience of grief or in turning from an evil**

course. Yet the results of sin are manifest in its use. God's heart is grieved at man's iniquity, and in love He bestows His grace, or in justice He terminates His mercy. It indicates the aroused emotions of God which prompt Him to a different course of dealing with the people. Similarly when used with reference to man, only in this case the consciousness of personal transgression is evident. This distinction in the application of the word is intended by such declarations as God "is not a man, that he should repent"."

The second word is used almost entirely by prophets with the main idea being a person's attitude toward sin and God. Again from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: "It implies a conscious, moral separation, and a personal decision to forsake sin and to enter into fellowship with God. It is employed extensively with reference to man's turning away from sin to righteousness (Deuteronomy 4:30 ; Nehemiah 1:9 ; Psalm 7:12 ; Jeremiah 3:14). It quite often refers to God in His relation to man (Exodus 32:12 ; Joshua 7:26). It is employed to indicate the thorough spiritual change which God alone can effect (Psalm 85:4)."

In the New Testament there are three words used for repentance, but only one refers to man's ultimate change of heart due to his recognition of his sin toward God that affects a deep inner desire to turn from what is egregious to God so that in character and conduct a change occurs that is initiated by a changed heart. The word John uses is a word that describes a spiritual change in the sinner's return to God. It simply and intentionally means "to have another mind" or to change one's opinion with regard to sin. Sin has me going in one direction and through repentance I turn around and go in God's direction. It is an admission of wrongdoing on my part with the desire and determination to change my way of living.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

further states: **The change wrought in repentance is so deep and radical as to affect the whole spiritual nature and to involve the entire personality."**

We could say that there are three components to repentance. There is an intellectual component that involves the **mind**. I must agree with God about His opinion regarding sin, that it is a heinous act toward Him against His holiness. I then consider that I must change my ways to conform to God's character.

True repentance must also include the **emotion**. We can know about our sin but not turn from it. Only knowing about may only produce a fear of punishment which may not produce a hatred for sin or an abandonment of it. Our feelings may be a powerful force to turn us from sin. The feeling is expressed in a strong conviction over sin that results in remorse for the wrongdoing. We see when Peter sinned by denying Christ, Scripture says he went out and wept bitterly. The conviction of his sin brought an emotional response.

Finally there is a volitional element, the **will** must be involved in repentance. I can acknowledge my sin and even be remorseful for it, but unless my will acts and I make a conscious decision to change, I haven't truly repented. This is what the Old Testament meant when it spoke of a turning. It is a conscious decision of a free will in recognition of individual responsibility. It is what the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* calls "a **determined abandonment of sin and return to God. Not material sacrifice, but a spiritual change, is the inexorable demand of God."**

Psalm 51:1-17

True repentance involves all three – mind, will and emotion. This is the message John preached in the wilderness to the crowds who gathered. He was the prophetic voice once again calling people to get right with God by repenting.

It was a prophetic word.

It was a public warning.

II. IT WAS A PUBLIC WARNING – v. 7-18

John's message challenged people to turn from sin and get right with God. The evidence of repentance would be seen in their conduct and character. The evidence of a change would be seen in their life.

His message was a warning that unless they repented, they could expect and would experience divine judgment. His message was practical.

I'm not sure how well you would take it if I got up every Sunday to preach and called you a "**brood of vipers.**" It's harsh and critical. But he didn't mince any words and cut right to the heart of the matter. The audience was Jewish. They thought they were on their way to heaven with nothing to worry about. After all they were descendants of Abraham.

John 8:31-41

Romans 2:28-29

Galatians 3:6-9, 29

They were smug in their belief that because they came from Abraham's lineage, they had it made. Scripture teaches that the only way to have a right relationship with God is through faith in Christ not through heritage. That is the message John the Baptist taught.

John continues his warning by stating that judgment is close at hand, the ax is already at the trunk of the tree, meaning that judgment is about to strike. When John speaks about fire, it is the fire of judgment. Scripture speaks of fire in two ways. Fire can be purifying. It's used to purify gold and silver of the impurities that are found in them.

Fire is also used to speak of judgment. We know that John is speaking about judgment because of the analogy he uses from farming. Referring to the Messiah as the divine farmer, "**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.**"

The wheat speaks of those who have truly repented. The wheat or righteous will be gathered into His barn or heaven. The chaff are people who have not repented. They are the ones who will be judged by being cast into fire.

Revelation 20:11-15 speaks about how all unbelievers will experience a baptism of judgment by being cast into the lake of fire.

There are a number of Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments that speak of God's judging fire. (**Deut. 9:3; 32:22; Jer. 4:4; Matt. 5:22; Heb. 10:26-27; II Pet. 3:7; Rev. 14:10-11**)

While John's message is a warning about impending judgment for the unrepentant heart, it is a message of mercy and grace, there was a way of escape from the coming wrath of God's fury. In response to John's warning the crowd asked what they should to avoid the coming judgment. Tell a person today that they are sinners and that judgment is coming and you're likely going to get a different response. You might be told to mind your own business or that's your opinion or who are you to say that what I'm doing is wrong. The truly repent person will acknowledge his sin and desire to do something about it so as to avoid judgment. That's what the crowd did. What are we to do?

Notice the different groups that are addressed. John speaks to three different groups: the greedy, the dishonest, and the cruel.

Now let me say before going on that John is not supporting a salvation by works. True repentance is accompanied by evidence of the same through a change in behavior. Those who hoarded their personal belongings needed to be generous to those in need.

Those who were tax collectors needed to be honest and exact only what was expected by Rome and no more. Tax collectors were greedy and dishonest.

They exacted whatever they wanted in taxes from people and the people were expected to pay. Scholar A.T. Robertson called them blood suckers.

Finally, there were the soldiers who also wanted to know what they should do. John told them to stop being cruel and not to wrongfully take anything. It suggests either the method in which it was taken or the amount that was taken. These were not Roman soldiers, but Jewish soldiers under jurisdiction of Herod. Their job was to assist with collecting taxes and often they used cruelty and blackmail to get more money. John states that they were not content with their wages so they resorted to cruelty to get more. They would often extort money by threat. Some business owners decided not to report all their assets so they wouldn't incur a larger tax. Soldiers would visit the owner's slaves and pressure them by force to tell them how much the owner actually had in assets. Then he would blackmail the owner. They did this because their own pay was meager.

John told them true repentance is accompanied by a change of heart and conduct. The conduct becomes the evidence of a changed heart. Going back to our earlier discussion of true repentance - mind, will and emotion are involved. Such a change in behavior would prepare the way for the Messiah to come into the heart of the truly repentant person. Repentance is not salvation, one must also believe in Christ as Savior. Would you agree that you can change behavior and not be saved? John's baptism was a preparation by moral reformation for Christ's coming. The real transformation would come when Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He is the agent of transformation in the truly penitent, believing heart.

John was not condemning their occupation, he was condemning how they conducted their responsibilities. The fruit of a repentant heart would be evident.

It would be seen in their generosity.

It would be seen in their honesty.

It would be seen in their contentedness and compassion.

The evidence of whether or not you have truly repented is in your life. That is the call for us to consider today as well. Our actions, our behavior, our attitudes are an evidence of true repentance. Paul would say it this way: **“Therefore if any man be in Christ He is a new creation, old things are passed away, behold all things have become new.” (II Corinthians 5:17)**

The sad truth of the matter is that many who repented in the wilderness did not have a true repentance. We know that because when the Messiah did come, they rejected Him.

About this passage John Phillips writes: **“Great mountains of pride were to be humbled, deep valleys of degradation and depression were to be dealt with. Crooked people were to be transformed, and tough, violent people were to be tamed. Repent!”**

John's message was a prophetic word.

John's message was a public warning.

John's message was a private witness.

III. IT WAS A PERSONAL WITNESS –

v. 19-20

Luke opts to close out the ministry of John the Baptist by telling us what happened to him. Most scholars believe that he began his ministry about one year prior to Christ beginning His ministry. Shortly after that he was jailed for condemning Herod Antipas who divorced his wife to marry the wife of his brother, Herod Philip. Herodias was the niece of Antipas, but that didn't stop them and John rebuked them for this incestuous sin. As a result, John was put in prison where he spent anywhere from 1-2 years. Herodias despised John for his public condemnation and had her daughter ask that John be beheaded.

John was never shy about calling sin what it was and it didn't matter who it was. The message was the same - repent. He spoke openly and honestly and exhorted people to get right with God through repentance. If they did not repent, then they could expect God's wrath. According to **Ephesians 2:3**, wrath will come to the unregenerate, those not spiritually reborn through faith in Christ. According to **Ephesians 5:6; II Thessalonians 1:8-9**; and **Revelation 14:10**, there will be a future outpouring of wrath. According to **Malachi 2:2-3** and **4:1-5**, the final wrath will be connected with the second coming of the Messiah. According to Jonah, we cannot escape God's wrath without His salvation.

True repentance will be evident in the fruit we bear. **Growing up at Camp, we would sometimes get canned goods that did not have any labels. We had two choices to determine the contents. We could wait until dinner and open it up hoping it was green beans and not ravioli or we could use the code on the bottom of the can and refer to a list typed out with the corresponding contents.**

When we go to the grocery store we are glad when there are labels so we can know what's on the inside. Our conduct and character are the contents of what is inside the heart. **What do other people see?** John is giving us a warning to heed if we have not yet repented of sin, but he is also telling us of hope through repentance and forgiveness of sin and faith in Christ. **Is your heart in a spiritually barren place today?**

When the Holy Spirit brings about conviction of sin, the result is repentance. There will be an earnest desire to pursue righteousness. We want to vindicate our name from the stigma of sin. There is indignation because of sin that dishonors God's name both in our own life and in others.

There is a great zeal for right living.

You may be here today and recognize for the very first time the need to repent, to become right with God. John's word is for you – repent.

You may be here today as a Christian harboring a sin recognizing your need to repent and turn away from it. It may be any attitude like resentment, anger, bitterness, wrong thoughts or it may be some act or conduct that is sinful like a cruel tongue, fits of rage, lying, some addiction. John's word is for you as well – repent.

In both cases, God stands ready and able to forgive. But if you do, know that the expectation is a change of heart, a change of mind, and a change of will. The Holy Spirit can only convict, you must act on that conviction and repent. He'll help you change. That's His job. He'll bring about a wonderful transformation that will be noticed by others.

Is there evidence of your repentance? If it's genuine, there should be.