



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 3:1-22

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## From Out of the Wilderness

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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When I was a child our family used to make semiannual trips to Port Arthur, Texas to visit our relatives. We always left during the summer months. And it was never much fun for either my brother or me. Five days of being cooped up in an air-conditionless '59 Chrysler station wagon was not our idea of a good time. But two things stood out for me during those trips. The first were the deserts we traveled across. Dry and desolate, they appeared out of nowhere with no apparent end in sight. There was no water to speak of. No sounds of life. Only stillness touched the landscape; one that was disconcerting to the soul. Both my brother and I felt it, though we couldn't articulate it at the time. The second thing I remember was the pool that refreshed us at the end of each day's drive. That we looked forward to with much anticipation. After an eternity of seeing nothing but wasteland we swam and played in the water till long after the sun went down. You know, in life's journey we often find ourselves in spiritual deserts, don't we? These are stretches of time and space where divine words are as hard to find as a drop of water in an endless expanse of heat and sand. Because God is not content to leave us in our weakness He often gives us dry seasons to wean us from our pleasures, to test or prepare us in some way. We've all experienced them. I've certainly had my share. Perhaps even today you're in the midst of one, wondering if the water hole is just beyond the next sand dune. Well, this morning, as we continue our study of Luke's gospel, we get acquainted with the ministry of John the Baptist – Christ's forerunner – who came to call God's people from out of the wilderness. Turn with me to Luke 3, starting in verse 1.

**“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharius, in the wilderness”** (vv. 1-2).

With a broad brush stroke, Luke paints a portrait of the political and religious setting that John was destined to impact. This is an impressive list of names.

They are ones we would read about in newspaper headlines or *Fortune* magazine, the “movers, shakers and players.” But it also points to the darkness that hovered around this period of history. The Roman power brokers had divided the Holy Land amongst themselves. And the high priests who called the spiritual shots were like lap dogs cowering before their tyranny. Sadly, Israel had become a nation without a shepherd; lost in a desert wasteland of unbelief. Four hundred years had passed since God had last spoken through a prophet. The songs of praise that had once flowed so freely were curiously silent. They had become bound to external ritual and complacency. For a while the din of “faithless spirituality” had filled the silence, but soon even this dried away. Some shook their fists to protest God's perceived rejection of them. Others settled into a lonely isolation to watch what might happen, there to perish, along with their hopes. False messiahs had appeared. But none were able to fulfill what had been promised to a desperate people. Surely the Messiah would come. But when? This question stood at the forefront of Israel's despair.

It was in these times, Luke tells us, that “*the word of God came to John in the wilderness.*” Like the prophets of old, John's ministry was a direct calling from God Himself. But rather than appear in the city of Jerusalem or the king's court as the prophets had done before him, John appeared in the desert, outside the established religious order of the day. One writer sets the context in this way: “The growth of Jesus was not hurried and forced, but slow and natural. For more than thirty years He tarried at Nazareth, waiting till His strength had matured and His manhood was complete. Then His hour was struck in tones audible to Himself and His people. The tongue that told it came from the banks of the Jordan and the waste places about the Dead Sea. There a new prophet had appeared, ancient in manners and spirit, modern in speech and purpose. No sleek scribe, no pompous priest, or courtier clad in soft raiment was he; but a son of the desert, clad in garments of coarse camel's hair, bound round him by a leather girdle, seeking his food from the rock where the wild bee left its honey, and the locust came – a man full of the stern spirit of solitude and the thoughts God speaks to the soul that can dare to be alone. He called himself a Voice, but

he was not like the still small voice the prophet had heard in his mountain cave; he was rather like the wind and the fire that broke in pieces the rocks, heralds as they were of the low sweet voice that was to come out of the silence they left." (A.M. Fairbairn)

**"And he came into the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God'" (vv. 3-6).**

John came to proclaim repentance as the way man must come to God. And the promise of true repentance is forgiveness of sin. This is what the people were looking for. And this is what they found as they listened to John in the wilderness. But John called them to demonstrate their repentance by, first, confessing their sin. And secondly, through accepting his baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. In other words, he wouldn't wash them in the water unless they admitted to needing a bath. This was a symbolic act that signified God's cleansing. It's not that John could forgive the sin of the people. But rather he was pointing them to the One who could. Over and over, the Scripture tells us that repentance unleashes an awesome energy from heaven that forgives, restores and redirects a life. There is no greater energy in all of creation than that which is unleashed when a repentant sinner cries out to God in sorrow over his or her sin. To repent means to change direction so we become reoriented to God. It comes from a nomadic culture where there were no maps or street signs. When one is traveling in the desert it's easy to get turned around. We lose our bearings. All familiar landmarks vanish from sight. And we finally get to the place where we say to ourselves, "I must be going the wrong way." This admission is one aspect of repentance. The other is to turn around and seek new direction.

My wife, bless her soul, has few navigational skills. And she wouldn't mind me saying so. I mean, how do you miss Big Sur when you're traveling south on Highway 1? But recently I've discovered that I'm not much better. One day we were driving along and after I made successive right-hand turns Laura asked, "Do you know where you're going?" Being a man of humility, I told her, "Of course, don't you?" She then watched me make three more right-hand turns and said the one thing no loving spouse should ever say: "If I can make a suggestion, why don't you stop and ask for help?" Don't

you hate it when someone asks that question? I like to think of myself as being under control, in the "zone" and knowing exactly where I'm going at all times. I don't like to admit my inadequacy or ask the gas station attendant for help. What would he know anyway? I'll just circle around the block for next 40 years until I get my bearings straight! But that's exactly what repentance calls us to do. Yet it's also the one thing we resist the most. To admit we don't have it all together, that all our oars aren't in the water, threatens our pride, our reputations and our need to be in control.

This is why Isaiah said that John's message would be like a great bulldozer pushing a highway in the desert, clearing away the obstacles that might hinder one's receptivity to the Lord. These inroads are built in the same way as Isaiah described it: *"Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth."* That's what repentance does. It levels the high peaks of pride that refuse to admit error. It takes what's lacking or depressed and brings hope. It points to our deception and directs us back to the Lord. It makes the rugged transitions smooth. Then God is there! If anyone would travel down the road of repentance, Isaiah tells us, they will surely see the salvation of God. What a wonderful promise!

John's message was touching a nerve in the people. A scent of revival was in the land. Literally thousands were leaving their homes, their jobs and families to listen to him in the desert. Among these were some of the religious leaders – the Pharisees and Sadducees – who appeared to be responding to John's call. But most likely they were investigating this gnarly prophetic figure who was preaching outside their circle and attracting such a large following.

**"So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father," for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed the ax is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'" (vv. 7-9).**

For a well respected Jew to submit to John's baptism was humbling. They were not in a habit of confessing sin publicly. So when John noticed them fiddling their thumbs and focusing on the externals

with no inward conviction or change of heart, he called them a *“brood of vipers.”* So much for communication skills! Like snakes scurrying before a fire they refused to admit the deeply rooted hypocrisy of their hearts. Instead they deemed themselves acceptable to God by virtue of their religious and ethnic heritage. We can imagine John pointing to a stone along the river bank and saying that God is able to give life even to stones to make them children of Abraham. What he meant was that salvation comes, not as a result of any inherent right one may have, but by turning in trust to the living God. We will never see Christ in His saving capacity if not through the lens of repentance.

John’s message was creating a moment of truth. All their strategies for maintaining an air of innocence were being challenged. And we see here a note of urgency, for when he called for repentance, he also told them of the consequences for not doing so. *“The ax is already at the root of the trees,”* he said. In John’s day, trees that didn’t produce were useless. The deadwood was cut down and used for firewood. Makes sense! Perhaps you have planted a tree in your back yard at one time or another. When the spring time came there was no bud. When the summer came there was no leafing or bearing of fruit. And the next year and the next it stood there barren, without bud or blossom or fruit. At some point you would say *“this tree is dead,”* and you would be correct. And so John is saying – it’s not enough to talk the talk. The evidence of inner spiritual life is always the fruit of a changed external life.

Now, to our ears, John’s words may sound harsh and judgmental. They may remind us of churches in the past that focused so much on sin one wondered where grace might be found. Today the trend has swung in the opposite direction. And this is just as deadly. In our culture, judging evil is widely considered worse than doing evil. Isn’t that true? We don’t need to look very far to hear someone say, *“You don’t deserve to be judged.”* *“No one has a right to evaluate anyone’s lifestyle.”* Or *“there are no bad ideas.”* Actually there are! And to claim that no idea is bad is one of the worst ideas I’ve ever heard! But the lines of truth are subtly being washed away. Simply using the word *“sin”* can trigger the most primitive of emotions in our day. Many would prefer that the church speak more tolerantly about *“neurosis”* or the desperate responses of people who have been hurt. Now, I’m no fan of sermons that say little more than *“burn, baby burn”* and I certainly empathize with hurting people. But I wonder if Shakespeare might not remind us that we protest our innocence too much. What kind of church would we be if we never held each other accountable for our actions. A man I both love and admire once asked me to challenge his integrity on a regular basis. *“There is*

*too much at stake not too,”* he said. This was a wise man. Certainly we want to do this within a framework of Christ’s love. But without confession of sin and a willingness to turn from it there can be no forgiveness. It’s towards this end that John was calling his listeners into account.

There was a second group that heard John’s ministry. These were the common folks; the tax-gatherers, soldiers, and people of all classes.

**“And the crowds were questioning him saying, ‘Then what shall we do?’ And he would answer and say to them, ‘The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.’ And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.’ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, ‘And what about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages’”** (vv. 10-14).

Notice that, unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, this group didn’t argue or protest their innocence. They simply asked, *“What then shall we do?”* They were willing to do anything to demonstrate the sincerity of their repentance. You have to love that kind of willingness! So John put his finger on the sin of each and laid down some broad principles to follow. He explained that those who had much should share with those who had little. That those in authority shouldn’t be mercenary, but honest and above board. And that everyone should be content with what they had. These prescriptions are striking in their simplicity. He didn’t ask them to recite ten *“Hail Mary’s”* and five *“Our Father’s”* or do something heroic. John simply told them to do the right thing. For the way we treat one another is always a litmus test for how we are responding to God. As God has demonstrated His grace to us, so we should extend the same to others.

The writer Stephen King made a speech one day at the Vassar College commencement. He called it *“Scaring You to Action.”* That’s typical! He told about how, two years earlier, he had been lying in a ditch by a country road, seriously injured after being hit by a van. *“I had a MasterCard in my wallet,”* He said. *“But when you’re lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.”* On that day and in the following months, he got a painful but important insight into one of life’s simple truths: *“We come in naked and*

broke, and go out the same way.” Of all the power we have, King said, “the greatest is the power of compassion, the ability to give. We have enormous resources, but they are only ours on loan, only ours to give for a short while.” He then challenged the students, “I want you to consider making your lives one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All you want to possess, from the Maserati you dream about to the retirement fund some broker will try to sell you, none of it is real. All that lasts is what you pass on. The rest is but smoke and mirrors.”

For most of us, the need to take responsibility and change certain behaviors is pretty obvious, especially when we're in the desert. It would be foolish to keep heading in the same way. But John doesn't hold out any self-help remedies as a viable option for healing. We need more than herbal cleanses and mud baths. Instead, he points to the true source of change, the coming Messiah

**“Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit 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 thoroughly clear the threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ So with many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people. But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison”** (vv. 15-20).

When the issue is raised as to whether he might be the Messiah, John humbly denies it. He didn't want his name on anyone's marquee. He then explained how one can know that Christ has come, lest the messenger be confused with the Message. In fact, there was such a gap between the two that John felt unworthy to untie even the coming Messiah's sandals. John's ministry pointed people to Christ, but he couldn't take them beyond that. He could preach repentance, hear confessions and baptize in the river. But only the Messiah could bring the baptism of the Spirit that gives life to all who respond. Only Christ could offer the gift that consumes, like fire, all that's barren and useless of one's life. This image of fire, however, not only refers to the Spirits' renewing and cleansing work; but also of the Messiah's authority to assess the true intent of man's heart. At the end of a harvest season, the farmers would take a large pitchfork and toss the wheat in the air. The wind would blow the lighter chaff away, leaving only the rich, golden grain on the threshing floor. The wheat was then stored in the granary, to be ground into flour for

bread. But the chaff was raked into piles and burned. With this analogy John was drawing a line in the sand. Those with impure motives were being warned of the Messiah's righteous judgment. But those who were sincere in their repentance would be prepared for His coming. The time to choose was now. John's message had reached every level of society. Even Herod was taken to task for his incestuous relationship with Herodias. But Herod responded in typical fashion. Given the choice of repenting or denying sin, the ruler removed the source of accountability. He rejected the Message by distancing himself from the messenger. And this is what many of us do today. We construct an array of creative strategies to avoid truth we'd rather not hear.

Many years ago, early in our marriage, Laura and I were thinking about buying a nice piece of furniture for our living room. But while talking to her mom one day Laura found out that she had a sofa she was willing to give to us. It was a white sofa . . . a very white sofa . . . a very white designer sofa, that was worth much more than we could afford. Her mom told us how to care for it, and so we strapped it in the back of a pickup truck and took it home. Our daughter, Jessica, was really young in those days, and so the Number One Rule in our house from that day on was..."Don't sit on the white sofa! Don't play near the white sofa! Don't eat around the white sofa! Don't touch the white sofa! Don't breathe on the white sofa! Don't even think about the white sofa! On every other chair in the house, you may freely sit, but on this sofa – the white sofa – you may not sit, for the day you do, you will surely die!" And then one day came the "Fall." Jessica had her friend Sara over for a play date. And there appeared on the white sofa a stain . . . a red stain . . . a red jelly stain. My wife called her mother, who told her it was impossible to get the stain out. So Laura assembled the kids together to look at the sofa. She said, "Children, do you see that? That's a stain. That's a red stain. That's a red jelly stain. And grandma says it's not coming out, not for all eternity. Do you know how long eternity is? Eternity is how long we're going to sit here until one of you tells me who put the red jelly stain on the white sofa." For a long time they all just sat there until finally Jessica cracked. I knew she would. She said, "Sara did it." Sara said, "No! It was the dog." Then it was dead silent for the longest time. Now I knew that none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they had never seen my wife so angry. I knew none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they knew if they did, they would spend all of eternity in the "Time Out Chair." I knew

that none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because in fact, I was the one who put the stain on the sofa, but I wasn't saying a word! Now, here is the truth about us. We've all stained the sofa. And there is only One thing strong enough to wash that stain away. The truth of the gospel is that, before God, all of us are on the same playing field. It doesn't matter if you're a leader in the church, a political mucky muck or just common folk, whether you know Jesus or not – we all need what the gospel has to offer. How difficult it is for us to admit "I've stained the sofa, Lord. Have mercy on my soul." How naturally we avoid taking responsibility and blame the externals rather than our choices. Do you know why God is so insistent that we face the truth and admit our sin to Him? It's because once we've done that, He is able to do what only He can do. This is the first step towards the grace of God being released in our lives.

Well, John was in the midst of baptizing those who were ready to receive of God's grace when an amazing thing happened. Jesus, the Messiah Himself, took His place at the end of the line.

**"Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased'"** (vv. 21-22).

Jesus had walked 70 dusty miles from Galilee, past Jerusalem, and down the Jericho Road until He arrived at the banks of the river. Can you imagine? And as John preached and baptized the crowds He presented Himself for baptism. Isn't that strange? I mean, Jesus was sinless. He had nothing to repent of. Why, then, did He insist on being baptized? Even John is shocked. Matthew's gospel tells us that John told Jesus, "Dude! If anyone is going to baptize anybody here, You're it." But Jesus insisted on doing it the old fashioned way. Why? Well, perhaps the reason can be found in the fact that Jesus began His public ministry in the same way He ended it. The righteousness of God demanded that blood be shed for the sin of man. And all of us, without exception, can't possibly pay the debts we've accumulated. But when Jesus came He took all these mortgages and notes and agreements we've failed to honor and endorsed them with His own name. This is what His baptism signified. On that day, Jesus declared His intent to meet the righteous demands of God by submitting to John's baptism. His baptism, then, was a shadow of the cross. He didn't enter the water as a sinner, but to identify with the sinful humanity He had come to save.

As Jesus prayed the heavens were opened. That which was real, invisible to humanity and yet eternal, was suddenly made visible to all who were standing on the bank. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, to anoint Him for the ministry He was about to launch. And a voice out of heaven announced, "*You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.*" Jesus was being publicly blessed by His Heavenly Father. The Father was shouting from the rooftops how pleased He was with the Son's willingness to sacrifice Himself for those lost in a desert of unbelief. One author said, "*The Father out of a heart of love for His Son and the world was willing to send His Son to earth to die for the sin of lost humanity. The Son, out of a heart of love for His Father and the world, was willing to agree with the Father to go to the cross; and the Spirit was willing to strengthen the Son to fulfill the Father's redemptive plan for all of humanity.*" Each member of the trinity was present that day on the river. In Christ, God had provided an oasis in a dry and desolate land. And so the question for those of us who are in the midst of one is – can we acknowledge our utter helplessness and turn to Him, or not?

At some point, and at many points in our lives, we will get a sense of Jesus calling us. This often comes during the dry seasons, when we're hurting over the direction our lives have taken, or we feel a sense of guilt and remorse over our sins. At this juncture we may recall the news: that the Lord loves us, that He died for us and has the power to forgive sin and change the direction of our lives. Something responds: an echo of truth connects with the longing that burns deep inside of our hearts. We desire Jesus. We thirst for Him. We have awakened to our need and the Lord's offer to meet us there. But we must first open our hearts. He won't force His way in. There is a famous painting which shows the Lord standing outside the door of a house knocking. The artist must have been very perceptive, for he painted the door without a handle on the outside. This door can only be opened from the inside. Jesus goes only where He is invited. We must invite Jesus in saying, "Come, Lord Jesus. Meet me in those empty places. Deliver me from my sin and prepare my heart to be used by You." Only then will Jesus enter. He promises that when we ask, change is not only possible, but the primary objective of His transforming power. This encounter doesn't have to arouse heightened feelings or mystical sensations. We don't need to see balloons flying or trumpets blaring. It's not necessary to fall on ones' face or talk in tongues. We can simply rely on

Isaiah's promise: *"Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God."* With this relationship a way out of the desert is forged. We will no longer be bound to our old ways for He will point us in a new direction and cleanse us from our sin. It's that simple! If you haven't asked Jesus Christ to be the Lord and Savior of your life, I'd like to extend the invitation this morning. And for those who have been walking with the Lord for some time, and yet find yourselves crying out in the wilderness, may this also provide an opportunity for you to resubmit yourselves unto His care.

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