



## John the Baptist's Hot Sauce – Touchpoint for December 8, 2021

**Luke 3:7-20 (MSG)** When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?” “If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.” Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?” He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.” Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He told them, “No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?” But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.” There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. *The Message!*

### **Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.**

*“If you have two coats, give one away, do the same with your food... collect only what is required by law... and be content with your rations.”*

Our preparation for Christmas continues with John the Baptist. Last week we heard Luke locate the presence of John and the coming of Christ in relation to 7 historical leaders. Two of which would play prominently in John’s beheading and four of which would be responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Luke’s readers know this when they read his gospel.

Luke isn’t just interested in giving historical facts. He is interested in presenting a contrast. Luke starts out by locating the story of John and Jesus in world history, but then turns it around and says that the history of the world needs to be located in and interpreted in light of the story of John and Jesus. After all, by the time Luke’s readers read his Gospel... Tiberius, Herod, Pilate and the rest are all dead. And the Christ and his community are still very much alive.

For Luke, Jesus doesn’t just come into the world, he takes the world into himself. It is quite a stunning reversal. I was always taught in seminary and beyond to interpret Jesus in the context of the times... Luke seems to be saying that we should interpret our world and lives in the context of the risen Christ.

This seems to be the point of John’s words. Yes, he starts with accusation and condemnation, but moves on to some very basic stuff of living a redeemed life—a life in the context of being a child of God. Now, instead of running from John and his words, the crowds ask in almost simplistic terms, “Then what should we do?”

Now this is a question we Lutherans often shy away from. We are so afraid of anything turning into works of righteousness that we run from any thought or statement of action on our part. But John isn’t trying to

tell people how to get in good with God, he's telling them what it looks like to live in the new reality. A reality in which the Mystery is King, so to speak, and not Herod or Tiberius or Pilate.

And how does John say to live? Well...

It is humanity 101. Christianity 101. It could have been written by Robert Fulgham since everything he needed to know he learned in kindergarten.

To the poor crowds, he says "Share". To the tax collectors, he says "Be fair". To the soldiers, he says "Don't bully." Whatever happened to believe, pray, give praise... meditate and contemplate? Whatever happened to "set your mind on heavenly things"?

It is so down to earth. So basic. So practical. It's sooooo unspiritual. Or maybe it's just trying to tell me that spirituality is not an escape from this world but a movement... a dive into it. Maybe it's just trying to tell me that the spiritual and the physical are not two separate things, but intimately connected. And repentance isn't an individual and personal morality play, but a relational reality.

This text drives us back into the world in which we live, not away from it.

And so, I must admit, this passage bothers me. I have spent years of my life reading and meditating on the faith life. I lived at a Retreat Center where I could devote myself to reading, contemplation and prayer. On top of that, I am an introvert. I find much connection with that bumper sticker that reads, "The more people I know, the more I like my dog" ... and I don't even have a dog!!!

And so, when I read this passage and others like it... that emphasize the physicality of spirituality... It makes me want to scream out at God, "Look God, if you're so adamant about our spirituality being physical then why don't You become a human being and try it?

Oh, wait... never mind.

When I was much younger, much, much younger, I wanted to be very religious. I even tried wearing a cross for a while but since I have sensitive skin it created a rash on my chest, so I stopped because I didn't see why my faith and bearing a cross should cause me discomfort!?!?!

It was then I moved into my "I'm spiritual just not religious phase." That one stayed with me for a while. But I have to tell you, this last year in particular, spending time with the Gospel of Mark... and now Luke... I can't even say that anymore. This passage, along with the Gospel of Mark drive me into the world and a relationship with others. The fruits that befit repentance are not tied to social moral values... or even believing in Jesus... there is nothing spiritual about them. Christianity is very much tied to this world and our place in it.

Spirituality is not an escape from this world but a movement... a dive into it. The spiritual and the physical are not two separate things, but intimately connected, and repentance isn't an individual and personal morality play, but a relational reality. I think it's time for me to stop saying "I'm spiritual, just not religious" and start saying, "I'm physical, just not religious."

And so, when John speaks to the crowd about fruits that befit repentance, he doesn't give spiritual advice, he doesn't become a spiritual director or faith mentor... OUCH!

What John is basically saying is, "Don't use your position to take advantage of other people." Really?!? Doesn't John know what the point of capitalism is? That's what our whole economy is based on. "Context John!!! Context!!! We live in America!!!"

And maybe that is the whole point of Luke's gospel and John's message to us in 2021. Yes, we do live in America! But we also live in something greater. We live within the Kingdom of God. We live and move and have our being within the Mystery... which is far greater than any human made government... which is far greater than any lines drawn in the sand or fortified walls that seek to separate us.

And no, we don't need to leave this country or anywhere to be a part of the kingdom of God and live within the Mystery.

It is quite remarkable that when John is talking to the tax collectors, he doesn't tell them to leave their jobs. He doesn't tell the mercenary soldiers to take up pacifism. He doesn't tell the poor it's their fault. He doesn't tell the despised riff-raff and low-lives of their day to take a hike. He tells them to live out the new reality right where they find themselves. He includes them within the Kingdom and says they have their place... and can bear fruit... right where they are.

And if they can be included, then who can't!!!

Apparently, when Luke quotes Isaiah that "ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God." ... he means it.

You see, on one level, living in the reality of the kingdom need not be heroic. Wherever we find ourselves is where we are called to bear fruit that befits repentance. And right now, I find that very "Good News." Because, I must confess, I feel very weary some days with this country, this culture, this society. It can seem so hard to know what to do in the face of constant division and hatred of the other... and one can feel so helpless. So that is why the Baptist's words to simply 'bloom where you're planted' come as good news.

And I also know it's not so simple as blaming others. I too am a product of this society and have contributed to it in ways both good and bad. I would love to be like John the Baptist and simply call everyone else a 'brood of vipers'... but I am very well aware that I am them and they are me.

It would be nice to think that it is only those people who will be burned up by the unquenchable fire that John talks about. But Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it well when he wrote, "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

And so, I need that unquenchable fire to burn in me. To burn away the chaff in me so that I can bear fruit that befits repentance. What I need is a continual baptism of water and fire... though frankly... I would just prefer the water.

And so, as John says, it is not my place to flee from the wrath to come... but to open myself to it... for it is my only hope. My hope is in the Mystery who will not settle for anything less than a transformed me, a death and resurrected me. My hope is in a relentless God who will never give up on me.

One who will meet me in my betrayals and denials and fear and cowardice and continue to feed me. One who will meet me in my betrayals and denials and continue to work in me.

One who will come to me in the bread and wine of this meal... only this time... maybe with a little extra, John the Baptist hot sauce... so that when I taste the Mystery, I say to myself... "Ooooh, that burns!!!"

**Amen.**

## **Spirit in the Desert**

### **Opening Songs**

#### **Be Still**

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

#### **Prepare the Way**

(Taize)

Prepare the way of the Lord. And all the people will see the salvation of the Lord

### **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

### **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

#### **My Soul Proclaims**

(Marty Haugen)

My soul proclaims your greatness O God, and my spirit rejoices in you.

- 1) My being proclaims the greatness of God. My spirit finds joy in my savior. For you regard me in my lowliness and every age shall call me blest.
- 2) Great and mighty are you, O holy One, strong is your kindness evermore. How you favor the weak and lowly ones. Humbling the proud of heart.
- 3) You have cast down the mighty from their thrones. Raising up those of low degree. You have filled the hungry with wondrous things and sent the rich empty away.

### **The Meal**

#### **Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel**

(Salt of the Sound)

O, Come, O, Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel.

### **Benediction**

#### **Let Your Servant Now Go In Peace**

(Taize)

Let your servant now go in peace, O Lord. Now go in peace according to your word

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