



TOUCH POINT

The Good Bad News – Touchpoint for December 11, 2024

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSVUE) “One who is more powerful than I is coming.”

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Grace and peace to you from the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

“And me, what should I do?”

“Tell me more about the tax collector and the soldier!”

I can relate to those guys who heard the plea from John the Baptist to produce a more worthy fruit in my life, fruit that represents a life that changed direction. Perhaps that's what John the Baptist means when he says, “a fruit worthy of repentance.”

There's a part of me, like the soldier, at war with either myself or with something else. There's another part of me that is like the tax collector, always looking for the next transaction, something that will bring happiness in the form of amusement.

In both the tax collector and the soldier, there must have been a deep longing for something more before John the Baptist showed up with his harsh words, words that must have cut deep into those wearing masks of obedience and complicity... harsh words that came with a warning to awaken their numbed consciences for survival.

John says to me, “There is one who is coming, who will bring good news to the humble!”

The tax collector and the soldier asked John what they should do.

I hear John saying, “Stop discerning the theological meaning of these passages and see the innocence around you.” They do not care who is president. They just want the oppressors, like the tax collector and the soldier in me to ask, “What should I do?”

Am I more disturbed that John’s words predict a God of love cutting fruitless trees down and burning them then the suffering of those around me? What weighs heavier on me, the threat to my theology concerning John’s image of a punishing God, or those mentioned who are cold and hungry?

The tax collector and soldier ask, “What should we do?” My guess is that they had been lulled into survival mode. They gave in to the hopelessness under dictatorial regimes. They could no longer see the trees through the forest of despair. Then someone brought hope with harsh words for their oppressive rulers in a time of every-man-for-himself.

“Open your eyes,” John seems to say. “I’m not asking you to fight or steal. I’m saying, notice those around you who are helpless also. Share with them a coat and some food. See outside yourself and build community. This is the fruit that brings life to your world.” John says there is one who is coming who will take care of the really big things you cannot control. These oppressors will have their day when they taste the bitter fruit of their heartless rule.

In today’s world, John the Baptist might quote statistics to awaken them.

- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys are victims of child abuse
- 1 billion are experiencing sexual violence globally
- From the 7.5 million reported child abuse cases annually, 3 million are being actively investigated
- BIPOC children and the socially and medically marginalized are the most vulnerable
- Before we slip into conspiratorial religious hyper focus on sex trafficking by strangers, it is important to note that 75% of abuse comes from parents and legal guardians
- 660,000 people experienced homelessness in 2023; 40% are unsheltered; 50% are alone.
- A decrease in targeted assistance since 2015 has given rise to a 13% increase in homeless veterans
- Through 2023, 47 million people live in food-insecure households; 13 million are children.

In other words, if you want to claim to be an heir holding special religious or nationality privilege like Abraham or Uncle Sam,

you may be a member of the brood.

If your wealth is achieved through extortion, not necessarily from a criminal sense but by withholding basic needs to others in exchange for this wealth,

you may be a member of the brood.

If you have made false accusations against others,

you may be a member of the brood.

The passage ends with the head spinning words, “Then with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people!”

Where’s the good news?

Perhaps we need to remember that Jesus said he came for the emotionally and spiritually victimized and hospitalized.

I know the Bible says people will be sent to burn if they don't produce good fruit, but I think we can say this is not consistent with the nature of God's love. But to warn people against preying on others is evident, and it is also loving. Perhaps this message should be taken seriously, as if our own lives depended on it.

Today, perhaps the good news coming is for those who've been refused a place at the holy table, or made to sit at the children's table at Thanksgiving.

It is for anyone who felt their baptism was used as a way of being jumped into a gang of believers and then marked with a personal per capita number.

It is great news for those who believed they weren't baptized in the Holy Spirit because it wasn't evidenced by physical emoting, trendy praise music or the confirmation and witness of tatted or ordained "men of God."

It is good news for those who were lured and disillusioned by a guaranteed forgiveness in exchange for self-loathing and private confession.

If your Christian education and personal life were monitored by religious staff for morality purposes... if you were ushered forward to the altar with hypnotic calls and heart string pulls that promised prosperity, purpose and belonging, only to watch the euphoric embers die and your wallet shrink... this good news is for you. If you have felt orphaned in this life and unequipped for times such as these... baby, are you in for a big surprise!

This good news of perpetual belonging is even for the enforcers of injustice who see their actions in the light of John's words, like the tax collectors and soldiers, those who wielded the force of money, position and weapons... in their humility, asking "What shall we do now?"

There is hope for all people who hear the good news.

It is no different today. The Spirit in this dry desert of our times sings, Prepare the way for good news." Where is this voice crying in the wilderness? It is in the barrenness of our own souls. It does not wear camel hair clothing and eat locusts, it is a voice pleading in our inner wasteland to turn the other way and follow the star guiding to the good news.

We will know this voice; we will hear it if we turn down the volume of pride and turn up humility. It is a personal and collective call that longs for us to see as the mystics see. It bids us to gaze into the eyes of unconditional love and weaken our grip on selfish advantage.

As we ask the question, "What should we do?", may we see a new vista and give thanks for a new horizon.

"All the days of my life, I want to gaze into your beauty, and meet you in this holy place."

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Prepare the Way

(Taizé)

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

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

Our Father (The Lord's Prayer)

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Benediction

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.