



A Voice in the Wild (Luke 3.1-20) | February 10, 2019

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Introduction

- We concluded chapter two with that story about the boy Jesus unexpectedly disappearing on Mary and Joseph after the Passover festival, and their finding him in Jerusalem's Temple after a frantic search. Out of that story we're reminded that God doesn't fit into the boxes we make for him, and time and again we see this depicted through the life of Jesus in the gospels. Jesus has a tendency of inconveniencing us by his drawing us into a larger story. So, one question that comes out of that story is:
 - *In our life of faith are we prepared for God to outgrow us? Are we ready to be drawn deeper, beyond our control and understanding?*
- We also in that story met a young Jesus *preoccupied* with what others around him seem to be missing. We see Jesus tuned in to God and to what God is up to in a way unlike the other characters around him. So another question the story asks is:
 - *What are we, as Jesus' followers, really preoccupied with? What or who are we really tuned into ourselves?*
- And the sense that there is something more to be tuned in to, that something is outgrowing us, continues into Luke chapter three, but on a much more dramatic scale.

Palaces and Power (3.1-2)

- When the curtain goes up in chapter three, we're brought quickly forward 18 years, out from Jesus' intimate family life, and into a much larger landscape. The opening of Luke three feels little bit like the beginning of a Star Wars film with those big, yellow scrolling yellow letters. Luke sets the stage for the next part of the story.

It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee...(and so on and so forth, Luke 3.1-2)

- We're told about all power players at the time, and what we're left with is a clarity about who's in control and where the power lies. We hear about the Roman Emperor Tiberius, for example, who at this time is living in seclusion and opulence in an impregnable fortress on the island of Capri, just off the western coast of southern Italy. (*Villa Jovis* - The House of Jupiter. For the Romans Jupiter was the god of sky and thunder, or the king of the gods. So that gives us some idea of how Tiberius saw himself.) At this point Tiberias has dissolved the Roman senate and is paranoid about assassination, taking every precaution to ensure no one gets anywhere close to toppling him. And so, from his island stronghold Tiberius sits on his throne seemingly immovable, ruling with an iron fist in luxury at a distance.
- Most of the others in Luke's lists at the beginning of chapter three are doing much the same. They're ruling with fear and control, sitting behind high walls, working constantly to hang on to power through violence, extortion or any other means necessary. And they tend to see themselves, like many in power throughout history, not as tyrants or oppressors, but as protectors, even peace keepers or saviors – large and in charge.

A Voice in the Wild (3.2-6)

- So it's with that background we're reintroduced to the character of John, the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth whom we met back in chapter one. Luke writes:

At this time a message from God came to John, son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River preaching that people should be baptized to show they had turned to God... (Luke 3.3)

- John's introduction in chapter three is dramatic. It's as if Luke zooms out to give us a wide-angle view of the world's geo-political landscape and then zooms very quickly back down again to one man, living out in the wild, doing some rather strange things like baptizing people in a river. John's a prophet and prophets tend to be polarizing figures – you either love them or you hate them. They're a little bit like people today who describe themselves as "truth tellers". They're often inconvenient, unconventional, determined to "tell it like it is", no matter the consequences. And so prophets tend to be problematic for those in power.
- That's John – he's telling it like it is, only he's doing so in public and with an obvious authority not of his own summoning. He's not just speaking his mind, we're told, but God's mind. John is given a "message from God". And the message is that people should return to God and away from their sin or error – error often demonstrated, even brandished or celebrated by those in power over them.

A Forgotten Throne (3.7-14)

- And we hear that John's own people, the Israelites, are responding to his message. Oppressed by the Romans they're all for a prophet who will

champion their hopes of liberation, freedom. They're all for "returning to God" if that means they can get rid of the Emperor. But we also read that people on the fringes of Jewish society are equally captivated by John's message. Tax collectors, even Roman soldiers are listening and responding. All kinds of people the average first century Israelite would consider an *outsider* (much like the shepherds at Jesus' birth.) When they come to hear John and respond by asking what *they should do*, he tells them to live differently: to share what they have with one other another, and not to take advantage of one another when they have the chance. He says, effectivity, to live differently than the likes of Tiberias or Pilate or Herod.

- Not only this, but John is *baptizing* the crowds. So, we're meeting a prophet out in the wild who is quite literally *passing people through water*. And if you were an Israelite living in the first century this would ring some bells for you, reminding you of story of the Exodus when God had freed the entire Hebrew slave-nation from the oppressive Egyptian empire. In that story we're told God parted a sea, the whole Israelite nation walking through it to safety. Now John's using *that picture* to depict what God would do again. All these baptisms are making a statement about what John, and his growing following, expect to happen next – a deliverance, a liberation.
- So at the heart of John's message is what we could call a vision a *forgotten throne* and a rallying call for people to pledge their allegiance to said throne over any other.

A Genuine Liberator (3.15-20)

- And to top it all off, at the heart of John's message, was that things were only just getting started. Luke writes that people thought John might be the one to lead or bring about this liberation from Roman oppression, John's response was that he wasn't even the main act.

...greater that I am - so much greater I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. (Luke 3.16)

- Never mind about who you think is in charge around here, says John. Never mind about the thrones found in palatial fortifications, behind deep set walls, guarded by thousands of troops. They're all *pretenders*. Someone else is on the way who's really going to shake things up – a *genuine liberator, someone who will bring real freedom*. So, *who's side are you on? (asks John) Are you in or are you out? You've got to choose who you want to rule you, so pick a throne*. (If all this is starting to sound like the makings of an impending rebellion that might land John in trouble, you'd be right, and it does. Heads will, quite literally, roll over all this.)
- But, this is who we meet in chapter three - Jesus' cousin John, out in the wild, standing up with a message, loud and clear: *God says the time is coming for a real shake up. Forget about the pretenders, all the other thrones, get ready for a genuine liberator. This genuine liberator, Luke tells us later in this story, looks much different than we might expect, different from other self-styled saviors. He looks instead like a tortured and dying Jesus, struggling to breath, hung up on a Roman cross. He looks like a failed liberator, but this is all part of the shake-up we discover in the story we find in the Gospels.*

Pretending / Pretenders

- That is, in many ways, what we face if we listen and respond to the good news about Jesus. We're drawn out of our usual surroundings and into the wild by a voice telling us something different than others tell us, or even what we tell ourselves for that matter.
- And the voice says that if we want to be people of faith, people who follow Jesus, we can expect a real shake up where all of life gets turned

on it's head. And it's then we begin to realize just how many *pretenders* we're surrounded by; how many thrones are piled up around us and even indeed within us. These *pretenders'* example and messages are numerous in our day and age, just as they were in John and Jesus' time.

- o These pretenders tell us that life's sole purpose is about achievement or productivity, and that our worth hinges on getting ahead and staying ahead; that we had better get on with doing something impressive, else why are we taking up any space?
 - o They tell us there's nothing wrong with only ever looking out for number one, and lure us toward pride, greed, lust – they seduce us toward selfishness.
 - o The pretenders keep us anxious and afraid of the future because, they say, control over tomorrow is in our hands, when deep down we know we hardly have a grip on today.
 - o The pretenders have a lot to say, and sooner or later we realize that *we're also actually one of them*. And that sinking feeling sets in as we face the fact that we can't possibly *give ourselves freedom or peace*.
- But that's exactly where the “good news about Jesus” comes in. That's why a real shake up can be music to our ears. And, just like all those who were drawn out into the wild to hear John, we can respond too. Responding means answering a question asked of anyone wanting to follow Jesus, to live a life of faith:

Are we ready to stop pretending?

- Are we ready to stop pretending and face the reality of God, who came to be known in and through the humble life of Jesus:

- o Jesus, who doesn't sit behind high walls on a fortified island, but who stands among us, shoulder to shoulder, in the crowd.
 - o Jesus, who didn't isolate himself from suffering and death, but who was himself baptized, submerged into it all, and came out the other side.
 - o Jesus, (in John's words) the main act, the central character, the one mysteriously "greater" than us all, showing us a new way that looks quite strange, even precarious at first.
- Are we ready to turn from the *pretenders* who promise freedom when they have no freedom to give? Are we ready to turn even from the *pretender* staring back at us in the mirror, and hear Jesus himself say later in St Luke's Gospel:
 - o *If any of you wants to be my follower you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?" (Luke 9.23-25)*
- A life of faith isn't make believe. It's about stepping further into reality with God. The reality of love selfishness; generosity over greed. Are we ready to stop pretending, and face up to the good news about Jesus - to step into reality with God and find the freedom only God can give.

Discussion Questions:

- How do the messages we hear from culture and Christ contrast?
- What would we call "pretenders" today? Are they the same as in Jesus' time?
- What do we look at to give us freedom or purpose?
- If you're able, share about a time you experienced God's freedom.