

The Way Back

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[0 : 00] Well, now we turn to Luke chapter 3 and it would be a great help to me if you would open your Bible and turn to Luke chapter 3 on page 56 in the New Testament.

In two weeks time, Jim Saladin is being ordained priest here at St. John's in the evening service, which we're looking forward to very much. And what is so remarkable about that is not that Jim should be made ordained in this way or that he should be ordained by Bishop Harvey. What's remarkable is the context in which he's going to be ordained, the context we find ourselves in. And I'm very thankful that God continues to push his purposes forward in the midst of our unusual circumstances.

When our context is very important for John the Baptist's ministry. And what Luke does as we come into this story of John the Baptist in chapter 3 is he sets two contexts so that we might understand John's ministry.

The first context is the list of names in verses 1 and 2, which we're used to hearing read each Christmas time. They are a who's who of power, status and money.

[1 : 23] And I used to think that these were in the Bible. Luke put them in there so that we might historically date John the Baptist's ministry to within a couple of months. I don't think that's the real issue at all now.

We know by now through Luke that salvation is a great reversal, a reversal of our usual notions of status and power and success. Remember last week if you were here, we looked at the two signs in the birth of Jesus, the sign of the manger and the sign of the child, overturning status, overturning power, upsetting the way the world works.

He has cast the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble of meek. So here in chapter 3, this list of seven names heaped on one another is like a tower of power of opposition to the purpose of God.

Just look at them for a second. Tiberius Caesar, he was a vicious, paranoid emperor and he deported the Jews from Rome and Tacitus reported, Tacitus the historian tells us that when he died, the crowd outside broke into cheers and then fell silent very quickly when they heard he'd revived.

And then they cheered again when they heard that Caligula had suffocated him. True story. And then they began to chant to the Tiber with Tiberius.

[2 : 54] I don't know how it sounds in Latin, but he was not a nice person. The next guy is Pontius Pilate. I mean, this is the guy who crucified Jesus for heaven's sake, made famous, his name is said every Sunday around the world where Christians confess the creeds.

And Herod helped Pilate put Jesus to death and Herod beheaded John the Baptist and Annas and Caiaphas bringing up the rear. These are the priests, these are the temple priests who were a kind of a mafia who controlled the temple.

They were the ones who brought Jesus to Pilate to be crucified and then in the book of Acts orchestrate the campaign of terror against the early Christians. See the context?

It is not a happy context for a comfortable and successful ministry. And I think that's the point in verse 20 where Herod locks John the Baptist up in prison.

Very tempting to say as a preacher because he taught the word of God on sexual ethics. But I won't say that. I'll just say that John taught the truth of the word of God unafraid of the audience.

[4 : 07] And that's the first context for John the Baptist and I think it ought to be enough to make our knees tremble. But there's a second context and it comes halfway through verse 2 if you look down and see it.

We read, The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. The word of God doesn't go to the palace in Rome.

It doesn't go to the temple in Jerusalem. It comes to this man John way out in the wilderness.

Because you see the political context is not the key context.

The context of power and status and money is one, it's a real context. But there is something deeper and much more profound and it is the context of God and the word of God.

And the word of God always in history looks fragile and weak in comparison with contemporary things. In some ways it comes into collision with status and power.

[5 : 11] But it is the power of God for salvation. It's a fresh word from God because God is about to bring a fresh work. And what is this word? Verse 3, here is his sermon.

He went into all the region about the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins which is nothing else than the gospel. This is the good news. This is the Christian message. This is the message of the Bible.

And it is what you and I and every other person most need to hear. I am aware that some of us barely make it to church on Sundays.

We come with big burdens. We want to hear a word from God. We want to hear and we want to have him come and fill our hearts. The message of John the Baptist is not what you might expect.

[6 : 11] It's not, John's not your average American pastor. But this is the word that we need to hear. And Luke paints it. It's two words really.

It goes in two directions. The first thing Luke does is it takes us up out of ourselves into the biggest possible perspective, the widest canvas possible.

And we go back into the Old Testament because we desperately need to know about the coming of God. And then secondly in the passage, Luke then takes us down into the narrow confines of our hearts, deep down into the concrete circumstances of our lives, deeper I think than some of us will be comfortable with, so that we might embrace the big thing that God is doing.

So that's the way the passage works. And there are two points. And the first is the big coming of God. And the second is what do we do? So firstly then, the coming of God.

Verses 4 to 6, you can see it's indented in the passage. It is a straight quote from the prophet Isaiah 40. How many times have we heard it this morning?

[7 : 22] Four or five? Thank you Terry for putting it in the hymns and in the choir pieces. It's very familiar to us. A voice in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Mountains and hills lifted up, rough places made smooth, all flesh shall see the salvation of our God. What's this about?

I want to take you back to Isaiah for a few minutes. So if you have Luke open, I wonder if you put your finger in chapter 3 and turn back to Isaiah chapter 40 please.

That is on page 633. We're going to try and cover Isaiah 40 to 66 in three minutes.

Okay. Now, last year we spent six months looking at the book of Exodus. Exodus. And how God's people were in cruel and crushing bondage and slavery.

[8 : 36] And how God redeemed and rescued his people and freed them from slavery and brought them to himself so that he might be with them in the wilderness and take them into the land.

But do you remember the great tragedy of Exodus is not Pharaoh and his army swimming in the sea. It is that God's people never really became free.

They were never truly free. And again and again and again as God loved them and gave himself to them they continually preferred to make their own gods than to be with their Redeemer God.

And someone in the congregation said this halfway through the series. It's one thing to take the people out of Egypt. It's a very different thing to take Egypt out of them. In one sense the Exodus was a failure.

It was only a partial redemption. Because true freedom only comes about through the forgiveness of sins. Our real slavery my real tyranny is in here.

[9 : 39] It's in my own heart. And you see the Exodus was a rehearsal for the great freedom the forgiveness of sins the great redemption that looks forward forward to the coming of Jesus Christ.

And when John the Baptist preaches stay with me when John the Baptist preaches his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins the word forgiveness is the same word as release. This is the great release.

It's the release from sins. So we're still doing the history of Israel. When Israel entered into the land they still had their old spiritual DNA.

They had been redeemed from Egypt but not redeemed from their sins. And even though God continued to extend his mercy and love to them they prostituted themselves and went after other gods.

They developed an amazing creativity for all forms of wickedness until finally God goes and expels them from the land and they are in exile.

[10 : 42] And it is when they are in exile in the foreign land that the prophet Isaiah speaks chapter 40 to them and he speaks of a new exodus of a new redemption of a new creation.

Look at how it starts chapter 40 verses 1 and 2. Comfort comfort my people says your God speak tenderly to Jerusalem cry to her her warfare is ended.

Why? Her iniquity is pardoned. Then you see in verse 3 the verses about John the Baptist a voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord the Lord is coming make straight his way in the desert God himself is going to come to his people that's the great redemption that's the great release God himself is coming look down at verse 9 get up on a high mountain Zion herald of good tidings lift up your voice with strength Jerusalem herald of good tidings lift it up don't be afraid say to the cities of Judah here he comes behold your God behold the Lord God comes with might he's coming and his arm rules for him behold his reward is with him and his recompense before him and here's what we sang in the last hymn he will feed his flock like a shepherd he will gather the lambs in his arms he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those who are with young God has a special place in his will for those who have young children here is the good tidings here is the gospel in the Old Testament that God is coming bringing with him his redemption this is the news of comfort it is the forgiveness of sins and because of that they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength they will mount up with wings as eagles they will run and not be weary they shall walk and not faint now this theme of the new redemption goes all the way through Isaiah 40 to 66 let's just turn over to chapter 43 verse 1 but now thus says the Lord he who created you

O Jacob he who formed you O Israel fear not why I have redeemed you I have called you by name you are mine this is the big redemption when you pass through the waters I'll be with you through the rivers they'll not overwhelm you when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and through the flame it will not consume you and one more reference over to 44 just over the page verse 22 I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like the mist return to me for I have redeemed you sing O heavens for the Lord has done it shout O depths of the earth break forth into singing O mountains O forest and every tree for the Lord has redeemed Jacob and will be glorified in Israel so God is doing a new thing he is going to come to the earth and he is going to bring salvation and when he comes he brings salvation like fire because like God in the first exodus God is fire and that fire consumes our sin if we allow it to and brings judgment and salvation that is what John is preaching if we turn back to chapter 3 of Luke he is sent by God to announce that this day has arrived the day of true redemption now it's very big isn't it it's very high and lofty and the question is what what does that mean what do we do so we move into the second half of our passage because you see the obstacles and the barriers to this new redemption are not physical mountains and difficult pathways they are the idols that we have created in our own hearts and all the things that keep our hearts in bondage that is why the rest of this passage from verse 7 onwards is dedicated to just one thing and it is repentance and repentance is the message that John the

[15 : 26] Baptist preaches and it's the message that Jesus preaches and it's what God calls for and it's what the Christian life is all about and so in this passage John gives us three pictures of repentance and each one of them is a reversal of the status quo so let's have a look at it shall we the first is in verses 7 to 9 and it's a reversal of the religious status quo verse 7 he said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come bear fruits that befit repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham now I've never heard a preacher say this to use this kind of way into a sermon to say to his audience you're all you're a pit of snakes and I don't think it's a preacher's trick that John is using it is tempting sometimes I must say to no no not the snake picture to use other pictures what John is doing is he is dealing with this poisonous habit that we have of using religion as a way of hiding from

God we can use our devotion and our religious observance to protect us from spiritual reality and John's audience here are using their spiritual heritage to avoid repentance we are children of Abraham they say we have impeccable religious credentials we were baptized Anglicans we were confirmed evangelicals and we have a bishop in the family if you like and John says you're not the offspring of Abraham you're the offspring of the snake your addiction to status and your use of money and your love of power and prestige it shows the complete emptiness of all your religious observance and who you really belong to do you know in the early 1700s Jonathan Edwards a preacher in the United States saw amazing revival and in his writings about the revival he said there's a great deal of pseudo false religious affections he says you can have great fervor and say long prayers and know huge chunks of scripture you can have the appearance of love and sing great and ecstatic praise to

God and not have a shred of real repentance because true repentance shows itself in fruit a change of heart that leads to a change of life a complete change of heart and without that change of heart and without the change of mind all our devotion and all our religious observance is toxic and empty and I think that's why the symbol of baptism is so alarming in this context it is saying to those who are Jewish being Jewish is not enough to belong to God that God is coming he's making a new people and you can't trust your religious status you need to submit yourself to a total immersion in the purposes of God and that is why repentance is a reversal of the religious status quo secondly he says repentance is a reversal of the ethical status quo verses 10 to 14 if you just look at those verses this is a moment that every preacher longs for the crowd responds to his preaching and three times asks the same question what shall we do what shall we do what shall we do and if after preaching and God moves you and the preacher has not spelled that out grab him at the door or even stand up and say what shall we do it would be a very good thing wouldn't it if God comes with forgiveness and salvation if God is coming you can't just sit there if you're really forgiven but it is going to lead to external changes and a reversal of the normal ethical status quo and it's very interesting the three little illustrations he uses in those verses all relate to money and status it has to do with the way we do our jobs during the week the way we care about people around us everyday behaviour and every one of these illustrations show the connection between our heart and our hand if you look at verse 11 there are clearly people listening to him who have enough wealth that they have the luxury of extra coats and food and John is saying that the mark of true repentance the practical mark of true repentance is being generous with what you have being willing to share what you possess actually that's not quite right is it it's not the willingness to share with others it's whether you and I actually do share with others that is true repentance it's not your intention that matters it's what we do with our cars and what our houses and with our money newspapers are full of ways to accumulate and hoard wealth and even they suggest you give to charity after you've hoarded enough and after you've made provision for your tax and that sort of thing John says no no no the fruit of forgiveness will be genuine generosity and then in verse 12 to the second group a group of tax collectors are there and you know that the tax collection system was a kind of institutional extortion the Romans put out tenders for taxation locals would bid on those tenders and if you won the tender you could then extort as much as you liked from your neighbours with impunity what does repentance look like if you're a tax collector I think these verses are very interesting and may be of special help to those who work in the finance industry because John does not tell them to find new work but he tells them to work out what repentance means in the day to day activity of their jobs repentance doesn't mean dropping out of life and becoming an ascetic it means entering into life more deeply with the knowledge that God is coming and to the tax collectors

John says don't rip people off even if you're in a position to do so but make decisions and take actions in the light of salvation for those of you who work in the money industry it makes a huge difference to know that the real problem is not the market meltdown but the coming salvation in Jesus Christ and then the third group in verse 14 are soldiers this is a very difficult verse for those of us who are pacifists I think they say what shall we do and John says you've got to stop doing certain things you've got to stop robbery and extortion and lying instead repentance means being content with your wages which is absolutely ridiculous unless there's something more important in life than financial security so you see again and again repentance is a reversal of the ethical status quo it's a reversal of our religious status quo it's a reversal of our ethical status quo and thirdly and finally in verses 15 to 17 repentance is a reversal of our spiritual status quo and now if you look down at verse 16

[23 : 35] John points to the Lord Jesus Christ and he says he's coming he's infinitely more powerful than I am I baptize you externally but he has the power to enter into your life and to change your very heart I can sprinkle some water on you but when he comes he will bring the Holy Spirit and baptize you inwardly with the spirit and with fire when you receive forgiveness he's saying God will enter into the very root and depths of your being with fire and cleanse you and make you new and I'm very thankful for this picture of fire this is the way God came in the Exodus and now as God comes again in the new Exodus he brings salvation and he brings righteousness and he brings shalom peace burning with love and purity and what we do as God arrives with us is we either allow him to burn away our sin or we hold on to our sin and we are burned with it it's a very powerful picture and notice that John is not preaching guilt or regret what he's preaching is the power of

God to change and reverse our spiritual DNA he wants us to see the great beauty of God and to delight in his holiness he names our sins and he wants us to turn against our own sins and not to keep the sins we love but to find the transforming power of the Holy Spirit the renovating changing transforming power of the Holy Spirit I wonder if you believe this do you believe that God has the power by his spirit the energy to make us new from the inside this is the practical end of what the coming of God will do so let me conclude I have three things I want to say by way of conclusion the first is this repentance originates in the good news of the gospel John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins the forgiveness is the great release that God has come to bring and ultimately you see the greatest blessing that can come to any of us is not brilliant status or endless cash or power or privilege it is being able to see the face of God and to be with him it's what we learned in the book of Exodus last year

God has made us to be with us and he will lift heaven and earth mountain and valley so that he will be with us he loves us and he delights to be with us and this is what John is preaching prepare the way of the Lord God is coming to us and when he comes and Jesus has come he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire and God himself will enter our lives with the power to change us and transform us but all of this is completely academic unless you believe that God is willing to forgive you and willing to make you new it's not going to make any difference until you believe that God is willing to enter your life and has the power to change you and you and I are never going to repent until we see that what God is offering is way better than anything this world offers or way better than what sin offers that is why I say that repentance is born out of the good news if Jesus Christ has come to save you he will forgive you everything if you ask him and he will enter your life if you trust him that's the first thing secondly

I want to say that repentance is essential to the gospel the gospel that John the baptizer preaches is a gospel of repentance the gospel that Jesus preaches is a gospel of repentance and the gospel that he commanded us to preach and that you find the apostles preaching is a gospel of repentance and the forgiveness of sins and perhaps I don't need to tell you this you probably know this but there is a very different gospel being promoted in many denominations today and in this new gospel repentance has been removed and instead of repentance and instead of the tender mercy of the Lord coming in fire we have an anemic acceptance and a tired tolerance and the love of God only functions to affirm me as I am and doesn't have any power to transform me and to change me instead of the Holy Spirit and fire you are fine just as you are because the gospel is about radical acceptance it is what

Dietrich Bonhoeffer the German theologian who was killed by Hitler in 1945 it's what he calls cheap grace it's the kind of forgiveness of sin which doesn't free us it's not the forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin it's the grace we bestow on ourselves cheap grace he said is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance baptism without discipline communion without confession cheap grace is grace without discipleship grace without the cross grace without Jesus Christ and it will not bear fruit in repentance but I tell you without repentance we have no gospel because without repentance we remain enslaved to our sin and unforgiven because salvation doesn't mean accepting our status quo it means overturning it and thirdly and finally I couldn't think of a good heading for this repentance is a very big deal I want to speak to any of you this morning who know in your hearts that you've never truly repented you're unsure of your forgiveness do you know you do not have the power of the Holy Spirit and fire in your hearts

[29 : 56] I want to just explain very simply that to repent means doing three things first it means turning away from every sin every sin and casting them on Jesus for forgiveness and when you ask for forgiveness he will that's the first thing second it means going even deeper than that and

confessing that I myself need a new nature I need a new life a new spirit and it's asking him to enter into our lives by the power of his spirit and to set our hearts on fire for his glory that's the second thing and the third thing it means bearing fruit living out the ongoing life of repentance in the concrete ethical decisions and circumstances of our daily lives of being someone who's sold out to Jesus Christ which is why every Sunday we gather we say a confession of repentance and we hear the words of absolution if you're someone who's never repented I say to you this morning turn to him and be saved save yourself from this wicked generation listen to these words from God I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist return to me for I have redeemed you sing oh heavens for the Lord has done it shout oh depths of the earth break forth into singing oh mountains oh forest and every tree in it for the

Lord has redeemed Jacob and will be glorified in Israel let's bow our heads and pray shall we heavenly father we thank you that you have brought salvation and redemption in the person of Jesus Christ and that you offer us the forgiveness of sins again we turn to you and we cast our sins upon you please forgive us and we pray and we confess that we need a new heart and a new nature and we ask that your spirit would come with fire to make us new and we want to dedicate ourselves to bearing fruit and living a life of repentance almighty God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ who desireth not the death of sinners rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live hath given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people being penitent the absolution and remission of their sins he pardons and absolves he pardons and absolves all those who truly repent and unfaintedly believe his gospel therefore we beseech him to grant us true repentance and his holy spirit that those things may please him which we do at this present and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy through Jesus Christ our Lord amen let us kneel and continue in prayer living God we are gathered here to hear your voice and respond in faith and obedience you have called us and set your love on us and we lift our voices in response Jesus we come in your name because you made the way you have reconciled us humbling yourself you became like us in our sin that we might become like you the righteousness of God a new creation holy spirit we come in the newness of life trusting you to fall upon us again binding these broken pieces of our lives frantic and fragmented to renovate us into your people a people who walk according to your character you have brought down the mountains of our pride and you have covered over the low places of our shame you have not feared to tread in all the dark and dungy corners of our existence righteous judge you are full of mercy and your kindness leads us to repentance be gracious to us and look upon us Lord in your mercy you alone establish us most high you make us stand firm without you we were without peace without joy without hope dead in our transgressions and sins as we walked in the ways of this world and under the spirit of disobedience but you you may make us alive with Christ you cancelled the

written code against us nailing it to the cross and so disarmed the powers and authorities triumphing over them in the cross and you raised us above with Christ and seated us above in Christ that we might be your inheritance your people for this world representing you in this world we confess that we have fallen short in word and deed we know our bad record and our sins are staring us in the face we don't want to play the religious game with you Lord and just go through the motions but we offer to you a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart you oh God will not despise Jesus we ask you to come with the divine fire of the Holy Spirit and burn away our self-seeking ambition and vain conceit cleanse us of our selfish thoughts our loveless striving and our greedy grasping free us from anger and gossip impurity and idolatry that we might be free to serve you whose service is perfect freedom and love to be with you whose love is better than life Lord in your mercy now Lord of the heavenlies send us forth into your world that we might be your hands caring for the poor and downcast in the neighborhoods of Vancouver that we might bring your gospel your good news in word and your good news in word and your good news in word and your good news in word and change our houses our workplaces our city your world just as the gospel came to us and changed us so your gospel cannot be contained it cannot be chained down but is bearing fruit all over the world I'll send it forth missionary God and we especially think of our missionaries working around the world Heather

Bellamy with Samaritan's Purse in Afghanistan Brian McConnacky with Ratnak Richard and Don Bates as they prepare to go to Cairo we think of Afghanistan and the violence and unrest there and God we ask you to bring peace to this land and to be with those who we know and who are dear to

us we think of our leaders and those in authority over us in this time of election both here and in the United States and we ask that you would turn the hearts of these politicians toward you that they might serve well providing peace and stability serving as those who must also give an account and we also think of the sick among us and those who are desperate for you and ask gracious father that you stretch out your hand and bring healing we think of Rowena and Fiona Ron Janet Marguerite and we remember silently the hurting ones in each of our lives
Lord in your mercy finally Lord may you yourself go before us leading us into graciousness guiding us in straight paths of humility be our guide in the way of the cross that as we follow you taking up our cross daily living as servants we might know life Christ in us the hope of glory for we ask for your sake and for your kingdom Amen Amen