

The way Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism, it's almost an afterthought. He wants us to know when the story takes place, who held office at the time, and how exactly John talked and performed his work. It takes him 20 verses to get to the part where Jesus is baptized, and that takes only two verses and attracts no public notice. So I think we should play along with Luke and see what he's trying to tell us about Jesus by telling us about John.

He begins with a wide lens, talking about who all the important people were and when this happened, but he zooms in for a close-up, not of the city or the government offices, but the wilderness, in which a guy named John is free-lancing, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Those words are so familiar to us, we don't stop to question them, but we should. Forgiveness of sins is what took place at the Temple. You took a sacrifice, and you participated in the ancient rite of atonement. It didn't involve baptism, and it was something you did yearly. So who did baptism? Well, the Essenes did. The Essenes, the people who preserved the Dead Sea scrolls, were a group who were so fed up with the way the Temple was being administered that they moved out of Jerusalem and went to live apart from society, in caves, where they could live an uncorrupted, more faithful life while they waited for the coming of the messiah, the destruction of the Temple, and the restoration of David's kingdom. If you wanted to join them, you underwent a baptism. And then you ceased to interact with the Temple; you omitted to bring sacrifices or to attend for forgiveness of sins.

It may be that John the Baptist was an Essene. Certainly what we see him doing is offering an alternative—and a challenge—to the Temple. Jesus is attracted to that. He goes out into John's wilderness to check it out. But so do quite a number of other people, and Luke tells us more about them first. "You brood of vipers!" John says, in a way that reflects more

conviction than charm. “Who told you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” He tells them that wrath *is* to come, and that they can’t count on any credit that their ancestors may have built up with God to shield them from that wrath. They’re going to have to come up with their own defenses.

Now, I read a really interesting theory about this “coming wrath” that I find compelling. Mark Davis¹, who used to write a column called “Left Behind and Loving It” in which he translated the Greek and discussed possible interpretations (and who also served Heartland Presbyterian in Clive for several years), pointed out that Luke is writing in about 85, about events that took place in maybe 25 or so. Luke the Writer and John the Baptizer are separated by the destruction of the temple and a significant part of Jerusalem, as well as the Romans’ decisive quashing of a rebellion, between 66 -70CE. That destruction, catastrophic for the Jewish people, may be what Luke thinks John saw as “the coming wrath.” And so it would also make sense for John to be offering an alternative to Temple functions, not just because it is corrupt but because it’s not going to be around much longer.

Again, seeing through Luke’s eyes, if the destruction of the Temple and Jewish leadership is what John’s anticipating, then his instructions to the people are colored by that expectation. The people are horrified by his savage predictions, and they ask how it is that they should “turn around,” or transform their lives, as he’s calling them to do. What, specifically, should they do? And John gives them this fairly pedestrian advice. If you have two coats, share one with someone who doesn’t have any. Why would you have two coats, in that simple society? It’s not because you need a dress coat and a casual one, or one for the car and one for walking. A coat was a coat back then. You’d have two coats because for some reason you had

one and then you inherited another, or found one in a lot of merchandise you'd purchased for business—something odd like that. And you'd keep the second one as backup in case something happened to the first one. What John is saying is, Give the duplicate to someone who needs it, and if something *does* happen to the first one, hope that someone in your community will help you out. Let community be your insurance.

Tax collectors paid the taxes on a stretch of road or whatever and then tried to make their money back and more by charging the users of that road. John's advice to them is collect what they need for their living, but not more than they need. Again, instead of building your nest egg, the implication is that if you have an emergency you'll hope for help from other people. What about the soldiers? For soldiers to turn to the prophet in the wilderness and ask, "What shall we do?" might be an act of treason. The Roman army was pretty clear about allegiances. What if John had said, "Kill your generals"? The soldiers had no idea what the answer would be, but by asking the question they are expressing a loyalty other than Rome and opening themselves to any number of possible answers. John's answer seems rather tame. "Don't extort money from people, be satisfied with your [probably meager] wages." It challenges our 'wild-eyed' view of John that his response so measured. And it seems to demonstrate that John is not aiming to overthrow the Empire as much as to demonstrate how to be faithful under an empire. "Do your job, but don't become dependent on it as a way to get ahead. If you need extra, hope for the community to help you out."

In this reading, John is telling people to reorient themselves for survival under an empire that would just as soon wipe them out. Rather than exploiting each other, or competing against each other for scarce resources, they are to be a community of mutual aid and support.

If everyone shares, then everyone will have enough. And if the Temple gets destroyed, you can still access the grace of God without the building or the functionaries—all you need is the people. It's simple to say, and any child can understand what John is describing, but it does truly require *metanoia*, transformation, to decide to invest in the community rather than to build up one's own reserves. Or, perhaps, the *metanoia* consists in the sudden clarity of vision that looking out for Number One actually is a formula for failure—that our only security, our only hope, lies in recognizing the reality that strong community is our pathway to thriving.

It is at this moment, when John the Baptist has laid out the map for abundant life under Empire, that Jesus apparently says, I have come to the right place. He is baptized along with “all the people,” not singled out publicly. But the Holy Spirit descends on him and God tells him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God is well pleased, or delighted maybe, with Jesus' commitment to the *metanoia* which John had described, the Beloved Community.

The *metanoia* that John prescribes is deceptively simple. His advice is very concrete, and it's not extreme at all. You get to keep your one coat, you get to charge the appropriate fee for the road whose taxes you paid. It's very do-able. But if we follow it, we do cast ourselves more fully on the goodwill of others than if we insisted on being rugged individualists. John's strategy calls for people to be far more aware of and open to interrelationship than we actually are, or than they apparently actually were. It is, as I said, a strategy for living under Empire. Now Jesus picks it up, and he will live out this strategy in such a way that it becomes possible to live in the reality of God's kingdom, even while Empire continues to assert its power. I think the message for us is that salvation is never individual or private. Salvation becomes

evident, becomes felt, the more we are able to build a community of interdependence. We don't have to accomplish it fully; we go by fits and starts, even the most devoted and enlightened of us. But the more we live by connection, the more we see that we do not depend on the powers and principalities for our well-being—the more clearly we see what is God's delight.

God, help us to see our opportunities for connection and interdependence. You have made us to be supports for one another; give us the vision and understanding to become more truly your Beloved Community. Amen.

ⁱ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/12/fleeing-wrath-burning-rubble-and.html>