



Date: December 6, 2015

Title: "Shutting Up John"

Scripture: Luke 3: 1-20

Description: To get to Christmas, you have to go through John the Baptist. "You Sons of Snakes! Who invited you...?" John the Baptist isn't easy.

"Who invited you?" Christmas dinner, like many Christmas events, had grown like a wedding, with more people in the house and around the table than anybody had premeditated. Cousins from out of town, uncles whom they swore last year they'd never invite back, college-graduated nephews and nieces with first-time "significant others".

Everyone takes a seat around the table—and the two card tables set for the children. Conversations end mid-sentence as they turn to Dad, who is to offer a word of welcome and maybe even say a blessing. Instead, "Who invited you?" he asks, softly and controlled like Michael Corleone in *Godfather 2*. No one dares make eye contact. "Who invited you?" --three words that will live in infamy in the family lore.

John the Baptist's opening line: "You sons of snakes. Who invited you to flee from the wrath to come?" It hadn't been easy to get to hear John, him preaching out in the wilderness and all. The synagogues in town would have been more convenient, and besides, they had padded seating. Is this how the Baptist welcomes visitors?

He sounds so judgmental, this fiery wilderness evangelist. "You sons of snakes! Who invited you?" Card-carrying children of Abraham, second generation PK's, third-term serving elders, all those who belong because they are unquestionably respectable, successful, and of course God is impressed with them as well God should be—these are good religious folks. They've gone out of their way to attend this revival. "You sons of snakes," he calls us. What do you have to do to satisfy this wilderness preacher?

The OT opened with the story of creation, then described what it means to be alive in this story...a story that includes crisis, calling, captivity, conquest, and

covenant. Into that conversation comes a man named Jesus. Christmas opens us to the story of what it means to be alive in the adventure of Jesus.

“You sons of snakes! Who invited you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” — John’s opening number. John needed to move them from their confidence that they had already done everything they needed to do and were only waiting for the applause and wondering what is taking God so long. “What is God’s problem?” they asked in their chat rooms; they hadn’t expected John’s surprising and harsh answer: “You. Your religious life-style is God’s problem.” The only reason John got away with it was that it was true.

Some of them realized that truth. They asked John a follow-up question: “What should we do?” “Don’t just make us feel guilty, show us how life can change.” John was ready. His tone softened. And that’s when he said the part that I don’t want to preach. Not on the first Sunday of December. Not when we’re trying to get into the Christmas spirit. Church already makes you feel bad. You walked into this room today and saw it decorated, beautiful and completely ready for Christmas Eve services. Is your place totally ready for Christmas? You’re innocently trying to get into the Christmas spirit, which didn’t happen last year until the third hymn of that Christmas Eve candlelight service. A little Christmas joy, some Christmas cheer would be a good thing, and here’s John the Baptist screaming at you. Fa-la-la-la-la!

Verse 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.” Start with generosity, he told them. Start with your stuff. But I preached that subject in October. I asked for your financial pledge; I held out a vision of what this church could do if you gave; many of you responded. If I preach generosity again so soon, you’ll say “All he talks about is money.”

And the Spirit of the Lord spoke unto me saying, “Fry, do you want to be liked or do you want to be Biblical? Do you want to be smooth and pleasant, or do you want to be honest and helpful.” Okay, this one Sunday — don’t hold me to do this regularly, right? This one Sunday I’m choosing to be honest, and I hope it will be helpful.

To be ready for Christ at Christmas, we have to go through John the Baptist. If you want to be in tune with God, “normal” can’t help you anymore. Including normal religion. John doesn’t offer a polite, tame message. John is fiery and intense. God isn’t interested in mere routine religion. God wants changed lives!

“Yes! We want changed lives!” they said to John the Baptist. “What do we have to do?” John told them; he told them three very real, very specific actions that would have them ready when God’s savior arrived to change the world.

(Verse 11) “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” If you have plenty, John is talking to you. With one in eight children in our city living in poverty, can we deny that we have plenty? If you have plenty, don’t just give, give radically.

This week, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, gave away 90% of his Facebook stock to charity--\$45 billion dollars. (By my calculations, that leaves Zuckerberg and his wife only \$5 billion to live on. I think they’ll still be able to put food on the table.)

If you gave away 90% of your income, what would you have left to live on? The Federal Guidelines define household poverty level income as:

No. in Family	Am’t of income (before taxes)
1	\$11,770
2	\$15,930
3	\$20,090
4	\$24,250

Do the math. Some of us could give away 90% of our income and still not be officially poor!

Let’s follow Zuckerberg’s lead in reverse. This December, give 10% of your income this month to the church, leaving 90% for us to live on. Pre-taxes, including year-end bonus. A one-month experiment. Think of it as a Christmas gift to the Christ child. Think of it as taking John the Baptist seriously.

That level of generosity would definitely affect this Christmas season—for you first, because the biggest impact of radical giving is always on the giver. It would also affect our neighbors who are helped, this church, who would grow in confidence and courage in following our vision for ministry.

Get fanatic about being generous. Generosity opens up your experience of the whole world. Generosity ties you to the whole world in a very good way.

(Verse 12) Tax collectors asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” They had a tax system

that was susceptible to corruption. The government chose a tax collector and assigned an amount from the district. Anything the tax collector raised above that amount was his to keep. It was their version of working on commission. To those on commission, to those whose income is determined by performance and production, John said: "Be satisfied. Your hunger to have more and more is an addiction, even when it's more and more of the same. Learn one word: "enough!" and put it into practice. "Enough" is a miracle drug to combat stress. When you're satisfied with what you already have, you become free from the tyrant bully that drives you, drives you, drives you.

(V. 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." "Don't misuse your authority. Don't exercise your "rights" to take advantage. You're here to serve, not to use."

Hard words, challenging words. We were hoping for comfort, not confrontation. Can't this wait until after December?

God knows how convoluted and complicated our lives are. The story begins by naming seven political figures on several levels of power in several regions, then names religious figures so as to draw out the thorny, specious dance of political and religious. This stuff belongs in the middle of the mess, not "back in the day, when life was simpler, or after the next election, when things get straightened up. God's time is now.

If Courtney had kept reading from the scripture, the very next word in Luke is "now." The word "now" has already been used 11 times in Luke's story. God happens now. Not in the sweet by-and-by, not when we've crossed over Jordan; now.

And where? In the wilderness. Wilderness is huge in Luke. Jesus is tested there (4:1), prays there (5:16), withdraws there (8:29) and feeds 5,000 people there (9:12). John the Baptist is a wilderness guy for people who find themselves in the wilderness.

We are instructed that this is the happiest time of the year, the most wonderful time. But maybe you're in the wilderness. If you have a smile frozen on your face, an appetizer in your hand, but your heart is in the wilderness, Luke gives you John the Baptist. John paves the way for Jesus. The "good news" story begins in the wilderness. Listen to John; maybe the good news story begins with you.