



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“What Will Grow in This Soil?”

Luke 3:1-6; 1:1-4; Isaiah 40:3-5

The Lord’s Supper

Sharon and I have lived in several houses, near Kansas City and Carmichael and now here in Auburn. We’re not big gardeners, but in most of those homes, we have tried to have nice landscaping, and to grow some vegetables in a garden. (Believe me, if we had to feed ourselves, we’d starve to death.)

When you start a new garden, you start by digging up the soil. In Carmichael, on the floor of the Central Valley that was covered by water for millennia, they have soil that is called, “hardpan”. We’d never heard of that before. It’s not quite the same as “clay”; think, “clay compressed into cement”. *That’s* hardpan! What can grow in that soil?

Here in Auburn, near the towns of ROCKlin and GRANITE Bay, we have lots of rock ledges in our yard. I don’t know how deep it goes, but as soon as you have to break out a heavy pick or jackhammer to plant a tree, you ask, “What can grow in this soil?”

As we’ll see this morning, that’s a question that seems to come up when people hear the words of God coming through a prophet, words of change that seem impossible. The people don’t want to hear it. They are like rock—the Word of God seems to just run off without making a dent. What can grow in such soil as that?

During this season of Advent that leads us to the celebration of our Savior’s birth at Christmas, we are following the themes of our Advent Wreath candles. Last week was “hope”, and this week is, “peace”. Our text today comes from Luke’s gospel, which we will read a lot in this year’s cycle of Scripture lessons. Please open your Bibles first of all to Luke 1, then skip the Nativity stories for now, and then resume in chapter 3. We’ll also briefly look at Isaiah 40, and the context there is very important, too.

Luke chapter 1 is the “dedication” of Luke’s volume. Here’s how he begins *[text]*

Luke dedicates his gospel to someone named “Theophilus”. Now, we probably cannot know this for sure, but I wonder about that name. Names are important, and not only in the Bible. We forget that most names are not just “personal labels”, they often carry messages. Mine does, maybe yours does, too. “Kenneth”, for example, comes from Scottish ancestry, and means “handsome”. That was my parents’ hope, anyway. Theo Michel—his first name is “Theodore”, which comes from two Latin words, the word for “God” and “lover”. Theo was named, perhaps deliberately, in the hope he would become a lover of God. And I can tell you, he is!

So, what about this “Theophilus”? Actually, it’s just like Theodore, but comes instead from the two GREEK words that mean “God”, and “brotherly love”. Perhaps there was a man

with that name who had been asking questions in Luke's congregation—questions about Jesus. So Luke got motivated to write on paper this "orderly account" based on eyewitness testimony, for "his Theo".

But I've always had another idea, one that I cannot prove or disprove. What if Luke was writing, not to an individual, "a Mr. Lover of God", but to anyone who had a love for God? What if Luke had in mind any and all new believers in Christ, who wanted to know more about the man who was Son of God? It's an attractive idea to me—in part, because it would mean that Luke was writing to you and to me, too, if we are lovers of God.

Now let's turn to chapter 3 in Luke, and listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Notice how Luke begins—he locates his account in time and in space. It's the provinces of Judea and Galilee (south, and north)—that is, old Israel—during an early-to-middle point of the Roman Empire's rule. Luke wants to anchor his account; this is not, "once upon a time".

John's parents, the old priest Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth had wanted children, but that time seemed long past for them. Like Abram and Sarai, like Hannah and her husband, the chance of a young plant coming up on solid dead rock, so to speak, was an impossibility. Except with God. With God obviously in charge of such an unusual turn of events, Zack and Liz indeed had a child in their old age. God's messenger had told them about it, and told them to name the child, "John". Now, no one in Zack's clan had been named John; "John" was not a Jewish name at all. Nonetheless, "John" it was going to be. God has special plans for him, the angel said. So Zack and Liz named him John, according to chapter 1 in Luke, and some 30-plus years later, in this chapter 3 of Luke, John begins to speak God's Word to his people around the Jordan River, where he would baptize them as a sign of becoming clean by repenting of their sin.

Now we've got the context for Chapter 3. In our chapter 3 itself, as an adult launched by God into ministry, John quotes the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, from what we call "chapter forty" of his book. Do you have a footnote in your Luke text that directs you there? Good.

People around John saw HIM as a prophet, acting out the message God was giving him. For John to quote another established prophet's prophetic words helped people understand what kind of message this was.

Now please turn to Isaiah 40, verses 3-5. I want you to see the context for this message from God through Isaiah to the people of his time, in the early sixth Century, B.C. Scholars divide Isaiah's book into three sections. For our purposes here, we could call them "The Book of Judgment and Doom", "The Book of Hope" (probably written by one of Isaiah's disciples), and "Restoration to Following God" (perhaps written by yet another disciple). The divider between "First Isaiah" and "Second Isaiah" is right here in Chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 are God's words of judgment on his people in Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom) for their abandonment of the covenant God had made with Moses and the Hebrews coming out of Egypt. The special laws and unique social structure God gave His people (so that—remember Genesis 12:1-3, the most important verses in the Bible—so that they could be a blessing to others) were being ignored. Rich people were taking advantage of the poor; social class lines were hardening. In addition, people had become really lax about observing the ceremonial laws—the sacrifices to bring to the Temple, the tithes for God's house, and such. To God's view, His people had clearly

decided to give up their special place in God's plan, just to get by more easily. As a result, real justice was hard to find—though if you had enough money for bribes, you could buy it. Corruption was rampant—think “Pakistan, today”.

God's response to this, he said through First Isaiah, was to toss these faithless people out of the Promised Land. And he used foreign armies to do it. First, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 701 BC, and threatened the southern kingdom of Judah. This was an intense period; God was giving Isaiah nearly-monthly messages for the king and people of Israel, but they didn't listen. Years later, Babylon invaded, overwhelming the North quickly, then laying siege to Jerusalem in the South which fell in 587 BC, and with it the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonian army looted the city, the palace, and the Temple—which was the worst insult of all. They carried back home with them not only the precious temple furniture and expensive artifacts, but also took the best and brightest people with them as spoils of the war. God had fulfilled His word spoken through Isaiah and other prophets, and it was a devastating blow to weakened Israel and especially to proud Judah.

Removed from their homeland to this foreign land as slaves, it looked as though the special culture of the Jews was going to be overwhelmed and obliterated by the dominant culture of Babylon. Jeremiah and other prophets--and some of the saddest Psalms--mourned the loss of the Promised Land, pleading with God to restore His covenant, and His covenant people. The soil of Babylon was wet with Israel's tears. What could grow in that soil, besides endless bitter fruit?

But then, with Chapter 40, there is a sudden turnaround. Listen for God's voice in verses 3-5. *[text]*

Chapter 40 begins, “ ‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.” God's people enslaved in Babylon could not believe their ears. Here they were in the deepest depression, without hope, “And you tell us to *hope*, Isaiah?!” Yes, indeed. Israel's and Judah's sentence will soon be up, and the jailhouse door of Babylon will be thrown open, and people can go home after some 50 years. Jerusalem will be rebuilt with miraculous help, God said.

It must have been hard for these exiled Israelites to accept this turnaround. There was nothing they could see in Babylon's political life, and nothing in their personal lives that yet looked at all like freedom was coming near. This “Second Isaiah” as he is called, probably one of Isaiah's disciples, was asking them to do something really hard—to hope; to hope in God; to hope in God for peace, as our Advent candle lighters proclaimed today. And it will come, Second Isaiah said, through God's Messiah, the Lord. The liberator, the Savior is coming, says Second Isaiah. Get ready!

I'll stop our recap of Isaiah there—even though we've skipped so much more detail. But the point of this is that John the Baptizer's mind and heart were guided by God to pick up these verses from Isaiah. What impact did they have, 760 years later than Second Isaiah, among John's fellow Jews? And what impact is intended for us?

In John's time, though the Jews had been back in Israel for a long time, they had been conquered again—by Greek armies, and then the Roman Empire. In John's time, they were held in a kind of economic captivity, made more irritating by the fact that this oppression was happening in their own home, in the Promised Land of God.

In the last twenty years of our time, many Muslims are angry that Infidels (that's us non-Muslim Westerners) have influence with the princes of Saudi Arabia. Well, it was a similar dynamic in John's time--a resentment directed in John's days against pagan Rome. Nationalistic Jews mounted regular revolts among the Jewish people, and carried out terrorist acts against both Roman soldiers and Jews who collaborated with Rome's empire. It was a time of great tension and danger. People were looking for peace, hoping for God's Messiah, begging for an outbreak of justice.

The Hebrew word for "peace"—you've heard the word, "shalom", right?—does not just mean "an absence of conflict". Shalom-peace means justice, right relationships with God and each other, no economic oppression, everyone getting what they need—that is, "righteous relationships that meet real needs". That's what the Bible means when you see the word, "peace", but it's hard for us to remember in our individualistic culture, descended from Greeks instead of the Biblical Hebrews. By quoting Isaiah's words about God's Savior, John got everyone's attention—both among the ordinary people and those in the political and religious establishments, who would be the first ones eliminated in any uprising. Such was the impact among his people of John quoting the prophet Isaiah. (And John would not stop speaking out, until it got him arrested and murdered by Herod, the King of the Jews.)

The reason the church reads Luke 3 before the Nativity/Christmas stories of Luke 1 is to inform us what kind of Messiah God is sending, what kind of man the little baby in the manger will grow up to be. Friends, no one would have cared about his birth, had it not been for Jesus' ministry and his death and his resurrection. The manger is marginal; the meat is in his Messiahship.

It's not the baby in the quiet manger who brings "peace", and he should not be worshipped; it's the grown-up Jesus, living to bring peace and dying to bring peace that gives us peace, purpose, and personal improvement to be instruments in God's hands, *in touch with God, ourselves*.

That's the "take-away" for us today. God has a purpose for each of us and for all of us together. We are to do what Jesus did—bring "shalom-peace", redress unjust relationships between individuals, nations, and God. And once we decide to follow Jesus into the with-God-life, we join with him so we can improve our personal qualities and skills to be a better and better partner with him. Our purpose—to bring peace—God's kind of peace. In partnership with God. Growing "to improve our serve," as Chuck Swindoll wrote.

Who do you know who needs peace? Who near you is on the bottom of the pile, without hope?

In his book *A Second Touch*, Keith Miller tells about a Christian businessman who was rushing to catch a train when, in his haste, he bumped into a small boy carrying a puzzle. The pieces scattered all over the sidewalk, but instead of rushing on to catch the train, the man stopped and helped the boy pick up the pieces even as the train pulled away. When they had finished, the boy looked at him and said, "Mister, are you Jesus?" When we allow Christ to live out his love through us, it makes an impact on those we encounter. Who has been upset by life, who life has fallen to pieces? Will you let your schedule be changed, so you can bring peace and wholeness to someone like that?

How might you “be Jesus”, to someone who needs peace? Plant the seed of peace and hope in them, and you could be surprised what great things could grow in the soil of their lives.

Video “Now What?”

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on December 6, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]