

WAITING FOR THE LIGHT *Peace in the Wilderness*

Luke 3:1-14

December 7, 2025

A friend of mine—interestingly, he’s a pastor now—used to drive around our hometown during high school in a maroon pickup truck with a bumper sticker you could read from two lanes over. All caps. Big block letters. No subtlety. “JESUS IS COMING. LOOK BUSY!”

And we do. We walk fast enough to suggest purpose and avoid interruption. We sprint through December like servers in a crowded restaurant, with our arms full and our minds spinning and a smile painted over the hum of “just let me get through this.”

It is a kind of liturgy, isn’t it? Find the tree. Buy the gifts. Take the pic. Send the card. We have middle school band concert and basketball practice the same night? Oh, that’s just *our* schedule. In our house, we talk about dividing and conquering. And above all, just keep moving. Seventeen days left.

But here’s the thing about liturgies. They shape us. With or without our permission, we are being formed by the practices we practice. And somewhere in the flurry of activity are the questions we can’t quite outrun. Busy doing what? Or perhaps more to the point, busy *becoming* what?

That’s when John the Baptist shows up. A bull in the Christmas ornament shop. Refusing to play along. No one ever accused John of subtlety. He speaks in all caps. Big block letters. He crashes our carefully arranged Christmas preparations and shouts his own version of a greeting, “Merry Christmas — you brood of vipers!”

You won’t find that on a bumper sticker, but having earned our attention, John wastes no time. And here is his message: The old world is dying, collapsing under its own weight. The axe is already sharp, waiting at the root of the tree. One swing and it all comes

crashing down. This is your final warning. If you need to change, you better do it now. Don’t just look busy. *Bear fruit worthy of repentance.* That is, the kind of fruit you can see, smell, taste, and touch. The kind of fruit that costs you something.

Luke’s story does not begin with starlight and shepherds, but with a roll call of the most powerful men in the world. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius...” And he goes on to name them all. The emperor. The governor. The tetrarch. The high priests.

Luke might have been a history buff, but this isn’t just context. It is an indictment. It had a name. The *Pax Romana*. The peace of Rome. It was no peace at all. It was order. Order maintained by force of occupation. Order maintained by crushing taxes. Order maintained by the swift violence for any who threaten the status quo. Tiberius ruled from afar, but Pilate kept his orders with crosses and blood. Herod played politics while the poor starved. Religious leaders made peace with empire and called it pragmatism. Their bumper sticker read: *Rome rules. Better stay close to power.*

He names them all, and then Luke shifts the camera from the palace gates to a river running through the wilderness. The Jordan. He pulls us from the places of power and pushes us to the edge of the map. Luke is clear. Salvation will not start at the center. It takes root on the margins. Into Rome’s carefully constructed and dutifully maintained world comes a wild man. And Luke says it was to this wild man, not to the emperor or the governor or the high priest, that the Word of God came. John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness, looking and sounding like he came straight out of the Old Testament.

He preaches, and the word spreads. Crowds begin to pour into the wilderness. John does not disappoint them. *Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? You brood of vipers!* John called them vipers not because they are monsters, but because they are hiding from a truth that would require them to change.

His voice draws them out from under their rocks, and it's hard to understand why. John offers them no comfort, no affirmation, no easy path. All John offers is the truth. And it is as if they have been starving for what he is serving.

They listen. They're baptized. They're transformed by a simple, devastating realization: life cannot remain as it is. This order enforced by Rome is only an illusion. Change is possible. Jesus is coming.

Luke names Tiberius and Pilate. We could name our own rulers, our own governors, our own structures, our own *Pax Romana*, the gap between the world God created and the one we've learned to tolerate. But I must tell you, John the Baptist does not address the rulers. He sets his eyes on everyone who made peace with that old order. Everyone who looked busy to avoid interruption. People like me. People like us, who come to church on Sunday, and light our Advent candles, and sing about peace on earth, and walk back into the world without blinking at all. Who participate and benefit and stay silent.

We are a brood of vipers. Not monstrous, but timorous. Hiding from a truth that might force us to change.

So, we arrive in the wilderness, where lies dissolve. Where we cannot hide behind our schedules and our stability and the comfortable fiction that everything is fine. And in the wilderness, we tell the truth: I need to change. We need to change. It all must change.

And so, the crowds ask John the only question that matters if Jesus is coming: *What then should we do?*

John doesn't flinch or hesitate. He's got three answers. Three groups. And no one gets off easy.

To the crowds: "If you have two coats, give one away. If you have food, share with the hungry."

To the tax collectors—that is, empire's enforcers, the ones who skimmed profit from the poor: "Collect only what is owed."

To the soldiers—the armed, the powerful, the loyal to Rome: "No extortion. No threats. No false accusations."

I hope you heard who showed up. Tax collectors. Soldiers. Now these folks would have gone a long way to get to John in the wilderness. They are the ones with authority to enforce Roman rule. They are the ones who benefit from the system. They come to the river, and they ask John the question. And John tells them the truth. If you have power to help or harm, John is talking to you.

Stop hiding behind your defensive distractions and spiritual abstractions. Change is coming. Concrete. Costly. Visible. And now is the time to bear the fruit of repentance.

Rome offers the illusion of tranquility. The comfort of moral distance afforded by affluence. The peace felt when the suffering of strangers can't quite touch you. And John calls this what it is: a lie. In place of Empire's *pax* he offers *shalom*. The peace that comes when the hungry are fed. When we stop pretending self-protection is our highest calling. It's the *Pax Dei*. God's peace. The truth that our lives are so woven together that there's no use trying to separate them. That we will never be well while our neighbors suffer. That there is no peace in hiding.

John shifts our eyes from the powerful to the person we walk right by, averting our gaze to avoid interruption.

Look at them, he cries. The ones without warmth. The ones crushed by cost. Squeezed out of opportunity. They are not pawns in your policy debates. They are not expendable. They belong to God.

Listen. If you want to prepare the way for Jesus, you must love as he loves. The one who is coming will do

everything John demands, and more. He will share his coat and his life. He will feed the hungry and be bread for the world.

Karen Johnson, our Food Pantry coordinator, updated us a few weeks ago. She wrote that in this economic climate, need is surging. We're up to 90 families per shift, three times a week. There's a scramble for food and volunteers.

And then Karen wrote these words. Big block letters. All caps. "BUT GOD! I have seen more goodness, kindness, and love than I ever recall seeing from my brothers and sisters in Christ. It is God's kingdom up close and personal."

So, my friends, in the wilderness, there is one question that remains. *What should we do?* John's answers are simple but not easy.

Check your closet. If you've got two coats, give one away. Check your pantry. If you have food, share it. Check your practices. Stop supporting systems that exploit other people. Check your privilege. Use whatever influence you have to protect those at greatest risk. This is not charity. It's not even generosity. It is peace. The kind that only comes through repentance.

Last month, deep in the logistics of Advent planning, our tables were filled with calendars and schedules and checklists, and in that staff setting, someone at the table asked a question that changed the room. She said, "If Jesus is coming, what would you change?"

At first, I thought, "Well the schedule is already set, and we're already halfway down the to-do list. We don't really have time to change any of this. It's already on the calendar."

But I haven't been able to shake that question. *What would you change if Jesus is coming?* I don't want you to shake that question either. Not this season.

If Jesus is coming, what would you change? There's still time to answer. Still time to pursue peace. Still time to prepare the way of the Lord.

If Jesus is coming, what would you change? I think you know. I think you've always known. Well, I've got news this morning. Jesus *is* coming. Don't just look busy. Go do it. Amen.