

Good morning! Welcome to New Covenant Fellowship. My name is Renée and it is my privilege to be the pastor here. We are so glad to have all of you from Spring Initiative as we prepare for Christmas. This Sunday we focus on hope. Because we need hope. When we look at the world around us, we know that things are not right. Not all of God's children have enough- enough food, clothing, access to good education, freedom, justice, and hope for a better life.

This was true in the time when Jesus was born too. The people who were in power were not interested in equality. Like today, often the rich used their power to get richer, to take money from those who had less. Because that's the way things have been done. People do what they can get away with. They use their positions to get more for themselves.

But the more things go wrong in the world, people look for change- drastic change. For leaders with answers. That is true now, and it was true then. There are people who say they have the answer to the world's problems, if we will just follow them. But how do we know who to listen to?

Two thousand years ago, some leaders said: *what we need is a revolution*. We need to overthrow the corrupt government. Take the power away from those who are using it against us. Others thought the way to survive was to *cooperate* with the government in power, gain positions for themselves, work with the authorities instead of fighting against them. But there was one guy, a rogue preacher in the wilderness, who said that *everyone* needs to change the way they think and behave. It starts with our stuff, and it's all about money. His name was John and he lived out in the desert and people came from all around to listen to him.

John said it didn't matter who your parents were or where your ancestors came from- whether they were good people or not. What matters is how you act now. How do *your* actions affect the people around you? Are you making the world a better place? John used the analogy of plants- are you producing good fruit? If not, what's the point of taking up space in the garden?

People recognized this wild preacher as someone with a message from God. Even some of those who had power went out to the desert to listen. Rich guys, in charge of collecting taxes, whose salaries were boosted by taking extra money for themselves. The military and the police officers who were supposed to suppress riots and uprisings, to keep order among people who were oppressed. Who took bribes as a way of keeping control. They went to hear John preach.

So, a lot of these guys weren't religious; they weren't pretending to be following God. But some of the most corrupt people were the church leaders themselves. (slide) They collaborated with the foreign government in the name of keeping the peace so that the church wouldn't get shut down. But a bunch of those people went out to hear John too. And they were moved by God's Spirit to want to do the right thing. Which gives us hope. Because even corrupt people, powerful people who use their positions to extort money from the poor, people who don't seem to be following God- they can have their hearts changed. They too can change their lives.

John called out the people in power. He challenged them. *What are you doing here? Are you here for entertainment, or are you ready to make some real changes in how you live?:*

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.” Luke 3:7-9 (MSG)

John wasn’t making it easy for them. He had no interest in playing nice. And probably some people turned around and left. Not everyone is interested in real change, especially if it isn’t obvious how it benefits them. But the hope is that God can move people’s hearts at any level of power. Then and now. People’s hearts, minds, and actions can change. So they asked a question, which is the same question anyone who wants to follow God asks today:

What should we do?

The answer depends on who you are. What should government officials do? What should police officers do? What should those of us who have more coats than we could wear this winter do? If we have pantries full of food and money to spend on extra stuff that we don’t need and our friends don’t want- what should we do?

The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?”

“If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”

Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He told them, “No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.” Luke 3:10-14 (MSG)

John’s answers are all about stuff and about money. If you have more than you need, share it with those who don’t have enough. Don’t take more money than you need. Don’t threaten people, accuse people, or use your power to take more money than you should. Be satisfied with what you have.

Two thousand years later, John’s message still applies. God looks for people whose lives show evidence of following God’s ways. Those of us who have much are called to share with those who have little. Those in power are challenged to use their positions to help people rather than for their own gain.

But what about those who have little, who might not have enough good clothing, enough food, who are at the bottom of the power structure? What is God's word to you? The message of the Bible is that God sees you. God knows your suffering. And a time is coming when that suffering will be relieved. God will be your hope, walking with you through the struggle to a bright future of healing and plenty. That is what the scripture from Zephaniah 3 that Caroline read.

14-15 So sing, Daughter Zion!

Raise the rafters, Israel!
Daughter Jerusalem,
be happy! celebrate!
God has reversed his judgments against you
and sent your enemies off chasing their tails.
From now on, God is Israel's king,
in charge at the center.
There's nothing to fear from evil
ever again!

16-17 Jerusalem will be told:

"Don't be afraid.
Dear Zion,
don't despair.
Your God is present among you,
a strong Warrior there to save you.
Happy to have you back, he'll calm you with his love
and delight you with his songs.

18-20 "The accumulated sorrows of your exile
will dissipate.

I, your God, will get rid of them for you.
You've carried those burdens long enough.
At the same time, I'll get rid of all those
who've made your life miserable.
I'll heal the maimed;
I'll bring home the homeless.
In the very countries where they were hated
they will be venerated.
On Judgment Day
I'll bring you back home—a great family gathering!
You'll be famous and honored
all over the world.
You'll see it with your own eyes—
all those painful partings turned into reunions!"
God's Promise.

Today's story about the preacher in the desert concludes with this sentence:

With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. Luke 3:18 (CEB)

What is this good news? For those of us with lots of things, that we can share them. We don't have to be burdened down with too much stuff, renting storage spaces and building bigger garages and houses and buying more insurance to cover all of our stuff. We can give it away and unburden ourselves of the weight of having too much.

For those of us with power, that we can stop focusing on using our jobs to get more money and make our own lives secure. Stop thinking about ourselves and care for the people entrusted to us and focus on what they need. Because when our lives are centered in helping the people around us, we become happier.

And those of us with plenty, that we can learn to be satisfied. Not to be anxious and worried, but to be satisfied that we are enough, that we have enough, and that we can do our jobs rightly.

And for those that don't have enough- God sees you. That there is hope. That there is a future for you. God is a God of mercy.

Later on in the service, our music group is going to lead us in a song where the main line is

Take the shackles off my feet so I can dance
I just wanna praise you, I just wanna praise you

This is a time to acknowledge the real shackles that exist in our world. That for many, the shackles of slavery have been replaced with the shackles of incarceration. **(slide- here are two different portrayals of John the Baptist in the Wilderness.)** We know people whose feet are in chains and need a hope that comes from God. And there are many in our world who are trapped in a modern slavery, where the shackles are invisible, but just as powerful. We sing as a prayer for deliverance and release from a system that is not justice for all, where people need to be rescued from exploitation. The God of the Bible is a God of justice, and we are called to bring mercy and justice of God's kingdom here in our world.

There are physical shackles and there are emotional shackles. Some of us are shackled by depression and anxiety. Some of us are held prisoner by substances and abuse. There are many things that can keep us in chains- some internal and some external, some visible evidence of an unjust society, some invisible to observers who think that the facade of everything being fine is a fact.

As we sing today, let us pray for those who need deliverance so that they can dance. From physical shackles, from emotional or other chains, and for our our deliverance. Because the hope, the joy set before us, is that we will be able to dance. Unencumbered by the things that have held us. (slide of wilderness)

We are going to pray, and then the communion tables are open to anyone who would like to know and serve this God of justice. At the tables, we remember that Jesus was killed by an unjust government, but God was faithful to raise him from the dead to give us hope. We take communion together as a symbol of our hope for a new kingdom and eternal life of freedom.