

“What Are We Doing Here Today?”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

Luke 3:7–18

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Have you ever felt like you showed up at the wrong party? Perhaps someone switched guest lists or a “friend” just wanted to make you feel silly, but whatever happened, you did not belong. I feel this way today. You are singing joyful songs about the world changing for the better. You are preparing for the birth of a precious child. The mood is as sweet as it possibly could be... until I show up, saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance...” Does your preacher ever talk to you like that? I didn’t think so...

But I not only say this; I go on to make demands of everyone. After my call to repentance, three groups of people come to me with trembling knees — the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers — all asking, “What then should we do?” And I tell them bluntly — whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none... Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you... (and) Do not extort anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages... How will you respond if I tell you bluntly what to do — you lawyers, teachers, engineers, doctors, business owners, and government workers?

Even when I talk about Jesus, what do I say? “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Now, that fits the sweet mood, doesn’t it? Luke concludes his telling of this story by saying, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Good news? This is good news? Can you imagine how bad news sounds? What in the world am I doing here messing up your precious baby Jesus party? I feel like Forrest Gump among the Black Panthers... I should not have been on the invitation list. What am I doing here?

Well, I am preparing the way for Jesus, the same Jesus whose birth you anticipate with such great joy. But the thing is he doesn't remain a precious child forever. Even children, in the real world, have a complex mixture of qualities — they scream, they make messy diapers, they are cesspools of infection... but still they are precious. Jesus doesn't remain like this forever, though his dear mother Mary might wish, after the fact, that he does. All the suffering he experiences before his brutal death at such a young age... no mother ever gets over that.

But Jesus grows up, as we all do, and my, how he grows! He teaches and preaches and heals and challenges the powerful to treat the vulnerable better, fulfilling Mary's vision. You know it as the Magnificat. It is a rap song for the ages, a social protest manifesto worthy of Woodstock! Jesus turns the world upside down, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:51-53).

He turns the world upside down, and the world doesn't much like it, at least those at risk of losing power, voice, position don't. It's not that different in your time, is it? The rich and powerful don't give up their riches and power without a fight. The path to justice and peace is messy. Jesus knows this, but he is after a better way, whatever the cost, God's way of justice and love, the beloved community, and the only way to pursue it is by making changes in how we live.

That's why I am so blunt in my answer to the question, "What then should we do?" Share what you have, do your work with integrity, don't take advantage of others. Be honest and civil with others, extend compassion to those in need. This is the way to joy and peace.

I don't say it quite this eloquently. It's just not my style. I'm a rap artist, not a folk singer, unless you think Bob Dylan. I'm a truth teller, not a pacifier; a prophet, not a pastor. You need both, whether you want both or not, and I have to be who God calls me to be.

But the thing is I'm a lot like Jesus. I'm not Jesus, I think I make that pretty clear. I'm not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. But I am a lot like him in the way I pursue God's vision of a more just and righteous world. His ways are a lot like my ways, even if he has a softer

edge. And remember — he is the one for whom you are preparing. When you anticipate with great joy the coming of a savior, this is who and what you anticipate — not just one who begins as a precious child everyone can adore without any controversy, but one who grows up into a man who extends compassion and fights for justice, and thus one who inspires passionate loyalty and equally intense opposition, so much so that they eventually put him to death, like they do me.

Your hymn puts it this way (singing).

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.

Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears, for the day draws near,

And the world is about to turn.

Everyone likes wiping away tears, not so much the burning of justice and the turning of the world, but Jesus is about all these things.

So, if you are preparing for all of this, perhaps I do belong here today. In fact, you need me here today, as a kind of reality check, with my loud voice and blunt manner, wild honey and locusts and all that goes with this prophetic message. You need someone to challenge you, to push you to ask the question, “What then should we do?” If we are serious about wanting to prepare our hearts for the Christ who comes, what needs to change in our lives and world?

But I may be assuming too much. Are we serious about this? Perhaps it’s not just me who needs to ask, “What am I doing here today?” What are you doing here? What are we all doing here? Are we looking for a good feeling, a little assurance, some glimpse of the possibility that the world is not in hopeless decay? Are we looking for entertainment, a nice performance, something to distract us from our worries and concerns? Are we just here going through the motions? We know we’re supposed to be in church, especially at Christmas, our mother made us come, whether she is still alive or not. A mother’s guidance, like a mother’s love, reaches out from beyond the grave...

Or are we here because we simply cannot be anywhere else, we have to know what we need to do to welcome Christ, we need to find a

way to help others experience Christ's love, whether in great music and beautiful decorations or clothes to wear; or in food to eat, a warm place to sleep, and people who care about them? Why are we here?

I cannot answer that question for anyone else. But I can urge you to address it in your own heart. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't. But no matter why you are here, it's good that you are. Jesus welcomes everyone into his presence whether they are there for the right reasons or not, whether they are living in a way good people of faith respect or not. He welcomes everyone because he can't extend love and compassion to them any other way. It's up to us as to how we respond to this gracious hospitality, though it is also incumbent upon us to extend this same kind of welcome to others, if we are preparing the way for Jesus.

I guess I'm glad I got invited to this party, whether I was supposed to or not. You seem like good people, the decorations are fabulous, and the music is wonderful. I do wonder where the food is... eating locusts and honey can make a person mighty hungry! But I also sense that you are the kind of people who want to prepare the way for Jesus, just like me... or at least a little like me. The music and decorations will help with that. So will your service in this community.

And remember — it is good news that we have to proclaim; even when it seems hard, it is good news. It is news of the birth of a Savior for all people, of God's love for the whole world, of delivering the oppressed and feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger and visiting the prisoner, proclaiming the time of God's favor. People need some news like this right now.