**Comfortable in His Own Skin**

**Text: Luke 3:10-14**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Well, the tree is down, the decorations have been put away and Christmas is really over for another year. I’m always a little melancholy when Helen and I are cleaning-up after the holidays, but by the time we’re done I’m ready for the next new thing.

If you lived in Judea, around AD 30, the next new thing was John the Baptist. His message was new, his appearance was new, and his actions were somewhat novel as well. Today’s text is from Luke, but Matthew gives us an idea of John’s creative eccentricities. He says, “John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4). This was not standard fare in the 1st century! You weren’t going to find John in a men’s fashion ad.

But it was John’s message that really got people’s attention. He called them a “brood of vipers.” He told them that if they didn’t change their ways, they would be like trees cut down and thrown into the fire.

Not the recommended way to warm-up a crowd! This isn’t Dale Carnegie’s “how to win friends and influence people.” John begins by insulting his audience, and then he scares the living daylights out of them!

For better or for worse, the man was “doing his own thing.” Clearly John was comfortable in his own skin. But it wasn’t just about him. He was also compelled by the Holy Spirit. And despite all of his eccentricities, he was connected to the real world. In all these ways, he served as a model for those who would be engaged in the next next new thing: following the Christ.

Comfortable in his own skin. Compelled by the Holy Spirit. Connected to the real world. Let’s look at all of these things in turn.

Comfortable in his own skin. Yes, John certainly was. I mean, you don’t wear strange clothing and consume an eccentric diet unless you’re just really comfortable with being who you really are; being the person whom God called you to be. Maybe most of us, if we were even tempted to be so unconventional, would be so worried about what other people would think that we wouldn’t do it.

And then there’s the matter of John’s message. Some phrases from my youth come to mind. He was just “letting it all hang out.” He was just “telling it like it is.” The sense I get is that he didn’t really care if people listened to him or not. He wasn’t trying to build-up a following. He was just going to preach the message that God placed on his heart, and let the chips fall where they may.

I dare say that most of us are not inclined to so freely speak our minds. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Many a household survived the holidays because folks around the dinner table kept the conversation light; not dipping into politics or religion or anything else that might rock the gravy boat. When someone says something controversial, most of us are pretty adept at changing the topic. “Hey, Uncle Frank, who’s going to win the Super Bowl?”

But John wasn’t consumed by a desire for conformity. He didn’t care if he was popular or praised or considered “most likely to succeed.” He was just being the best John the Baptist he could be. He took the gifts that God gave him, and the passion that God placed on his heart, and then he did what came naturally. No pretenses, no acting, no coveting of gifts that God had given to others, no pretending to be someone that he wasn’t. He was just real. He was just authentic.

It’s amazing how much easier life becomes when we follow John’s example. It takes a lot more energy to pretend to be something that we aren’t than it does to be authentically ourselves. Which is why, with me (on my good days anyway), what you see is what you get. I’m never going to be one of those cool pastors, wearing blue jeans, sitting on a stool, just kind of talking with you all. And you all are never going to be some kind of mega-church, with a gazillion people packed into the Sanctuary, but no one knows anyone else. And that’s a good thing! I’m always going to be wearing a robe, and you’re always going to be the warm, caring people whom you are, showing the love of God by the way in which you take care of each other.

God calls us to be the authentic. God calls us to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. As individuals, and as a congregation. It’s okay to be comfortable in your own skin. It’s okay to be the person whom you really are. Because God made you. And as someone once said, “God don’t make no junk!”

John insisted on being authentic, regardless of how unpopular that might make him. But here’s the amazing thing: people listened! They paid attention; they practiced what he preached. That’s what happens; not only when you’re being authentic, but when you’re compelled by the Holy Spirit. And John was. Of course he was.

Everything in Luke’s gospel is compelled by the Spirit. It starts in the first chapter, when it’s revealed to Zechariah that he and his elderly wife are going to have a baby. The angel Gabriel says to him, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John...even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:13, 15).

From the moment he was conceived, John was filled and compelled by the Spirit. That’s why he was so comfortable in his own skin; so consistently authentic. The Spirit gives you that deep down, solid conviction that you need to say certain things, and do certain things, however crazy or unpopular or unconventional or impossible they may seem. I experience it this way: you get a feeling in the pit of your stomach that is both strong and exciting, and you say to yourself, “I can do this; I must do this.”

Sometimes it’s an individual thing; and sometimes it’s a collective thing. In a meeting, perhaps, you feel it moving in the room, as one idea sparks another and people get excited and by the end of the meeting you can’t wait to get out of the room and get on with the seemingly crazy or impossible thing that you’ve all committed to do. That’s the way it was on the second day of our Leadership Retreat back in August: already at breakfast several of us were talking excitedly about the Camp in particular: about the new things that we could do and the new possibilities that we saw opening up. So it’s no wonder that the story that eventually emerged out of that excitement – Our Future Story – is especially about the revitalization of Camp Bedford: which is part of who we are, part of what God has called us to be.

We were compelled by the Holy Spirit. And amazing things happen when you’re compelled by the Spirit. Like people listening to John’s unconventional message. If we’d gone out to the wilderness and heard John call us a “brood of vipers,” we would’ve said, “If you’re going to talk to me like that, I’m going to join another church.” But that’s not what happened. Not only did the people stay and listen to John, they took him seriously. They said, “What then should we do?” They were ready to repent of their sins and take their lives in a new direction. Compelled and empowered by the Spirit! The Spirit spoke through John and the people were riveted!

But however crazy John might’ve seemed, his advice as to what they should do was remarkably connected to the real world. This man who was so comfortable in his own skin and compelled by the Spirit was, in the final analysis, connected to the real world. And he wanted his followers to be so connected as well. The people ask, “What should we do?” and John’s advice comes down to this: share what you have, be fair, don’t bully.

Share what you have. He says, “If you have two coats, share the spare with someone who doesn’t have one.”

Be fair. He says to the tax collectors, “Collect what you’re entitled to collect, but no more.”

Don’t bully. He says to the soldiers, “Do the job that you were hired to do. Protect the people; don’t lie or cheat or intimidate the people in order to get your own way.”

Hmmm… share, be fair, don’t bully. That’s just down-to-earth, common sense, real world stuff. That’s what God’s people are called to do. So says John. That’s what God’s people at the corner of 15th and K are called to do. Share, with the real world, out there. Think of what we say in Our Future Story: we’re called to reach outward to connect people with God’s abundance. We’re called to take the good stuff with which God has blessed us here, and share it with our neighbors out there. That’s why we’re here. That’s what we’re meant to do and be. We’re not called to do our own insular thing inside these walls, we’re called to share God’s abundance with others. Everything that we do ought to be passed through the filter of that why: Reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance. That’s what our Coat Bank does; we’re doing exactly the kind of sharing that John the Baptist calls us to do. It connects us with the real world and it’s part of who we are. But why stop there? Folks need clothing throughout the year; like when they’re starting a new job. That’s why Our Future Story says that we’ll expand the Coat Bank into a year round Clothing Ministry.

Share, with the real world, out there. That’s why we’re partnering with community groups who share our vision and can do good work in our building. It connects us with the real world and it’s part of who we are.

Share, with the real world, out there. That’s why this space is the home of the Bedford Community Children’s Chorus. We’re reaching out with who we are and inviting the community in. And the next new thing that we need to do with that is to have some of our members here from 5 to 6 each Wednesday evening, visiting with the parents who bring their kids to rehearsal, and then sit – right here in these pews – for an hour. The community is literally coming through our doors! We need to let them know who we are; the warm people that we authentically are. And we need to let them know about the good news of God’s love that we’re called to share.

John wanted his followers to be connected to the real world. Better yet, he wanted Jesus’ followers to be connected to the real world. Well of course! What else would you expect from one who pointed to the Word of God who has become flesh right in the midst of our real world messy lives? John – and then the One to whom John pointed, Jesus, and indeed all of God’s prophets – they point us (to quote Pastor David Lose) “to the very places in which [we] already live and work, love and laugh, struggle and strive, and suggests that these places are precisely where God calls [us] to be, where God is at work in [us] and through [us] for the sake of the world.”

Comfortable in your own skin, compelled by the Spirit and connected to the real world. That was true of John. That was true of Jesus. And to the extent that we’re faithful to Christ’s call, that is true of the Church; of each of us and all of us. Indeed, God invites us to be all of these things with the same words that God spoke to Jesus: “With you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). If God is well pleased with me, just the way God made me, who am I not to be pleased with myself? Who are you, not to be pleased with you? Who are we, as a church, not to be pleased with ourselves? We are called to be the people whom God made us to be, and compelled by the Holy Spirit, to share God’s abundance with the real world just outside our doors. This is our mission. This is what we are called by the Christ and empowered by the Spirit to do and be. Amen.