

March 8, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

*When Jesus heard the news of John's death, Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place. (Matthew 14)*

The Gospel of Luke begins in the Temple with John the Baptist's Father, Zechariah, standing before the altar making that day's incense offering for the nation. As the fragrant smoke fills the Temple, Zechariah has a vision of Elizabeth having a child. The angel declares "you shall name the child John".

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, went with haste to the hill country home of her Uncle Zechariah and Aunt Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, baby John leaps in her womb. Filled with the Holy Spirit Elizabeth sings out, *"Blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb.... as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed."* It is tender: nestled in Elizabeth's womb, John leaps for joy to greet Mary and Jesus. (Luke 1)

At the Baby Name Reveal Party, Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit prophecies:  
*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
 you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,  
 to give God's people knowledge of salvation  
 by the forgiveness of their sins.  
 Because of the tender mercy of God is dawning on us,  
 shining to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Luke 3 tells us when *Tiberius was Caesar, Pontius Pilate was governor, Herod ruled over Galilee, Philip ruled over Iturea and Caiaphas was the High Priest, John appeared in the wilderness baptizing and preaching "Turn towards God, the kingdom of heaven has come near"*. John wore a camel hair tunic and ate bugs and palm fig honey. (Matthew 3) All kinds of people from Hellenized Jews, to strict Pharisees, to Roman soldiers and scribes joined the regular people listening to John preach. John deconstructs any notion of "A Chosen or "Christian" Nation", saying *"bear fruit worthy of repentance! Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able to raise children to Abraham from these stones."*

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river. Coming up from the water Jesus hears God say, *"you are my beloved"*. (Matthew 3)

John (the Beloved Disciple) tells us when the Pharisees said, *“Jesus was baptizing more disciples than John”* Jesus withdrew from the wilderness and headed back to Galilee. (John 4)

King Herod Antipas married his niece and half brother, Prince Philip’s, ex-wife, Herodias. Gross! The Levitical law allowed for divorce but not for marrying your niece. (Matthew 14) This arrangement led to a minor regional war. (Josephus) John the Baptist called out Herod’s corruption and was arrested. When Herod locked up John, Jesus withdrew to Galilee. (Matthew 4)

Locked up in prison, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or should we keep on looking?”* Jesus’s answer should define our understanding of the Kingdom of God, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind find sight, the lame walk, those with skin diseases are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”* (Matt 11) How might one determine what if a nation is a “Christian” nation? Well, is there access to healthcare? Do poor people feel good about what is going on?

Three chapters later, an immoral King throws a lavish party that ends with John the Baptist being executed. It is a shocking, disgusting abuse of power. The commentators invite us to notice the contrast between the unjust ways of this world’s kings and the ways of the kin-dom of Heaven, where 5000 people eat a free meal!

*Now John the Baptist’s disciples came and took the body and buried him; then they went and told Jesus.* (The respect and love between Jesus and John, allows John’s heart-sick disciples to find sanctuary with Jesus) *Now when Jesus heard this news, Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place.*

It is okay to be heart-sick to feel a deep sense of loss. It is okay to break your routine and mourn. It is healthy to leave the news cycle for a day and seek solace and sanctuary. Our individualistic or maybe our productivity culture fuels a tyranny of action. We feel we must post, take action, assign blame, point a finger, or somehow do something. Prayer invites us to do something deeply counter cultural discourages. Prayer invites us to ponder who we are before we act. Prayer is not inaction, but thoughtful reaction. When we withdraw into prayer we can remember who we are, and who God calls us to be.

On Monday, I sent out a pastoral email reminding us of our United Methodist Social Principles,

*“The church deplores war and all other forms of violent conflict and urges the peaceful settlement of all disputes. We yearn for the day when there will be no more war and people will live together in peace and justice. ... We urge the church to care and work for systemic justice for all people affected by war, and to advocate for peacemaking and nonviolent conflict transformation in global and local conflicts. (The United Methodist Church Discipline 2024 163 F) .*

I sent that out and thought what now? I emailed my congressional representatives and decided to reach out to Belmont’s four active duty armed service members and a few other soldiers in my contacts. In the middle of texting, my phone rang with a Facetime call. There on my screen was one of my son’s dear friends, camo fatigues, hair high and tight, marines scurrying about. He sat eating his lunch. We chatted, *“Pastor Paul, I wanted you to see me, so you would know I am safe”*. We closed with prayer. I put down my phone and could not stop weeping. I wept for him, I wept for the families of the Good Tree School in Minab, Iran. I wept that some of our civilian leaders do not seem to deplore war. I found myself crying literal tears as my soul cried out *“Lord in your mercy”*. Perhaps we are a little less Christlike whenever we forget that Jesus wept for hurting people and for systemic injustice. (Matthew 19 & 23, John 11)

Jellyroll sings

*I know I can't be the only one*

*Who's holding on for dear life*

*But God knows, I know*

*When it's all said and done*

*I'm not okay*

*But it's all gonna be alright*

*It's not okay*

*But we're all gonna be alright*

Jesus withdrew by boat. Surely there was some peace as the disciples glided across the lake riding the breeze off the mountains. However, when Jesus arrived at the retreat center he was greeted by a crowd of needy people: vision problems, unclean conditions, mental illnesses, crushing needs. What do we do when the problems are stacked out the door? Do we turn around the boat and go home? Do we come to silently resent people in need? Do we demonize or de-humanize people who see the world differently than we do? Do we doomscroll? Do we self medicate?

*As Jesus went ashore, Jesus saw a great crowd, and Jesus had compassion for them, Jesus then cured those who were sick.* Do we slow down and remember that God sees

us and all people as beloved? Do we respond to a broken world with compassion? Do we withdraw and recite in prayer...

*The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
God does not deal with us according to our sins.  
For as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does God cast our sins away from us.  
As a mother, father, parent has compassion for their children,  
so the Lord has compassion for all. (Psalm 103)*

In "The Wounds are the Witness" Dean Yolanda Pearce, builds on the work of Henry Nouwen asking: "*Who can take away suffering without entering it?*" ... *The wounded healer is not simply a vessel for suffering. Instead, he or she is a healer with wounds: someone with agency, power, and autonomy, despite the wounds and the suffering. It is not the presence of wounds or the depth of his suffering that define Jesus's power and authority; it was his divine ability to heal, to set free, to repair, and to restore. By keeping our focus on the healing, we don't sanctify the suffering or valorize the harm. The suffering isn't holy; the One who heals, who is the source of our salvation, is.*"

Perhaps, we must retreat into God's compassion in order for God to use us to bring healing into the world? Perhaps, maybe, I am not sure, but perhaps when we fail to ground our souls in God's boundless compassion we inevitably if not accidentally perpetrate some additional harm in the world? Is the Apostle Paul right that "*If I do not have love, I am nothing!*"? (1 Corinthians 13.) Jesus withdrew into compassion and then offered healing.

When it was evening, the disciples came and said, "*We are in the middle of nowhere, there is not a Dollar General within 60 miles, it's late; send the crowds away so they can go buy food for themselves.*" Jesus replied, "*You give them something to eat.*" The disciples lament, "*We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.*"

Jesus spoke to the crowds, "The Lord be with You" and they all sat down. Taking the bread, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed it, broke the bread and gave it to the disciples, and they gave it to the people, and somehow there was enough. In fact, they collect 12 boxes for the food pantry..

The commentators want us to notice the contrast between King Herod's feast and Jesus feeding the 5000. In God's kingdom compassion reigns: a child shares their lunch and

miraculously 5000 people have enough to eat. When compassion guides our steps the hungry get fed, the thirsty hydrated, the sick find wholeness, the weary find rest, strangers find welcome, the powerful find justice, the poor find a place at the table. There is enough. Perhaps whenever we dwell in compassion, there is already enough.

Paul tells *“Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, be glory...”* (Ephesians 3) God, who can do more than we imagine, feels like a lot, but compassion always resets our imagination and needs. God is always doing more than we can imagine. Somehow a miracle occurs. A child shares their lunch, the disciples decide to try to “give them something to eat” and the crowds sit down and say grace. We look up to heaven and break bread. When we find compassion somehow we have enough, somehow a miracle occurs, somehow God brings healing on earth as in heaven. Amen