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Locusts and Wild Honey

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Locusts and Wild Honey
A Liturgical Drama on the Gospel of Luke 3: 1-61
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

The Characters

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

MAN 1 plays: Zechariah,
*Andrea's father and
one of Herod's soldiers*

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

WOMAN 1 plays: Elizabeth,
*Andrea's mother and
the voice of Salomé*

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

MAN 2 plays: the angel Gabriel,
*Andrew, a disciple of John
the Baptist
Herod Antipas, King of
Palestine and
one of Herod's soldiers*

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

WOMAN 2 plays: Herodias,
Herod's queen

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

MAN 3 plays: John the Baptist

In addition to being a member of the
COMPANY,

WOMAN 3 plays: Andrea,
a disciple of John

Author's note: *Locusts and Wild Honey* is a liturgical drama based on the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Advent (Cycle C, Roman, Episcopal, and Lutheran Lectionaries). As a dramatic elaboration on the Gospel, the play might take the place of a sermon in a service of divine worship. *Locusts and Wild Honey* has been constructed for six actors. Except for WOMAN 3, the actors play different roles at different times and together they form a chorus. The actors wear a uniform costume of solid colors to which they may add accessories to suggest character changes. The play has been designed for performance in the chancel. All the actors remain in view at all times. The director may wish to indicate their absence from a scene by having them turn their backs to the spectators.

WOMAN 3, Andrea, serves as link between the world of John, the Baptist, and our own. Thus, in staging, she should often occupy a position between the spectators and the rest of the cast. At the opening of the play, the actors might be arranged on chancel steps as follows:

¹ All quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible (1989).

<i>step</i>	MAN 2	MAN 1	MAN 3
<i>step</i>	<hr/>		
<i>step</i>	WOMAN		WOMAN
	2		1

center

WOMAN
3

The PROLOGUE should be delivered antiphonally, with MEN 1-3 and WOMEN 1-2 announcing the Gospel in a declamatory style; WOMAN 3 should be introducing herself to the audience in a much more natural, conversational voice.

PROLOGUE

MAN 2

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius

WOMAN 3

I was nineteen years old.

WOMAN 2

when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea

WOMAN 3

I was living in a community in the Gallilean wilderness.

MAN 2

and Herod was ruler of Galilee

WOMAN 3

Not Herod the Great, who had the innocent children murdered. He died in the year 4.

WOMAN 2

and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis

WOMAN 3

This was his son, Herod Antipas,

MAN 1

and Lysanius ruler of Abilene

WOMAN 3

but he was bad enough, as you no doubt know.

WOMAN 1

during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas

WOMAN 3

I'm from a good Jewish family --Levites--my father's a priest,

MAN 3

the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the Wilderness.

WOMAN 3

but somehow I never felt comfortable in the Jerusalem temple. My spirit was mysteriously drawn to the wild places

WOMAN 1

as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

MAN 3

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

ALL

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Scene 1: the Birth of John

MAN 1 dons a gown, a prayer shawl and yamalkuh and becomes ZECHARIAH. He goes to the altar to prepare it according to the prescribed ritual where MAN 2

*(GABRIEL) suddenly appears to him. Zechariah is afraid.
He stands fixed before the angel. While this action goes on,
WOMAN 3 continues.*

WOMAN 3

I had gone out to the wilderness because I'd heard of a fellow named John who was publicly convicting people of their sins, calling them to repent, and then dunking them in water to wash their sins away. It's called baptizing. John's family and mine are distantly related though I wasn't alive at the time of his birth. Some people report that his nativity was miraculous, others that it was suspicious.

MAN 2

(as GABRIEL)

[MAN 1 is surprised by the angel and drops to his knees in fear.] Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

WOMAN 1

John

MAN 3

John

WOMAN 2

John

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness

MAN I

But, but, but, how? My . . . wife is

WOMAN I

Old!

MAN 1

I myself am

WOMAN 1

Lots older!!

MAN 2

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

MAN 1

How is this possible?

WOMAN 3

Prepare the way of the Lord.

MAN 2

(becoming the glorious terrifying, and angry messenger of God)

I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God [*MAN 1 falls on his face.*]

WOMAN 3

Make his paths straight.

MAN 2

and I was sent to speak with you and to bring you this good news

WOMAN 3

Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be brought low

MAN 2

And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass

WOMAN 3

and the crooked shall be made straight

MAN 2

because you did not believe my words

WOMAN 3

and the rough places shall be made smooth

MAN 2

which will be fulfilled in their time.

WOMAN 3

and all the flesh shall see the salvation of God.

MAN 1 now turns on his knees out to the audience. The scene has changed and the audience is now in the position of those worshipers waiting for Zechariah outside the temple. Zechariah attempts, unsuccessfully, to speak with the people but he has been struck dumb. A leap forward in time and WOMAN 1, as Elizabeth, comes to Zechariah and indicates that she is going to have a baby and says . . .

WOMAN 1

His name will be "John."

WOMAN 3

By the time he was born, there had been lots of gossip in the village about the unusual circumstances of this particular birth. Word was that Zechariah was just too old to have fathered a child. Elizabeth herself was beyond child-bearing age, but there was no denying she was pregnant. When folks put these questions to Zechariah he didn't answer -- claimed to be mute ever since an encounter with an angel in the temple. Elizabeth only smiled, they say. After the baby was born, everyone assumed that, as Zechariah's son, he would be named Zechariah bar Zechariah. When the day came for circumcision and naming, the people found out they were wrong again.

WOMAN 1

His name is John.

MAN 2 & 3, WOMAN 2

What? Is he not Zechariah's son? His name must be . . .

WOMAN 1

(gentle, but insistent nonetheless)

John.

WOMAN 2

John?

MAN 2

John?

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

MAN 2

Zechariah, what will you name your son?

ZECHARIAH (MAN 1) gesticulates wildly attempting to indicate that this baby is a gift from God and should be named so. Finally, he makes the men understand that he wants a tablet and writing instrument. They bring it to him and he writes the words "His name is John." There is general consternation among the characters

MAN 2, WOMAN 2, MAN 3

(looking at the tablet in astonishment)

John!?!

MAN 1

(fairly leaping to life with a full voice, tossing the tablet over his head in reckless joy)

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel . . .²

² The italicized words are "The Benedictus," Luke 1: 68-79

MAN 2

What then will this child become?

MAN 3

Rejected, ridiculed, lonely,

MAN 1

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them

WOMAN 1

Indeed, the hand of the Lord is with him.

WOMAN 2

Suspected, vilified, condemned

MAN 1

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

MAN 2

Respected, glorified, worshipped,

MAN 3

and hungry, often.

MAN 1

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy

*covenant,
the oath that he swore to our
ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being
rescued from the hands of
our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and
righteousness
before him all our days.*

*MAN 3, now JOHN. returns to the stage in traveling
clothes and there follows a farewell and departure scene
between MAN 3 and WOMAN 1, his mother ELIZABETH.*

*Now MAN 1, Zechariah, speaks personally to MAN 3,
John, as a father would to his son.*

*And you, child, will be called the
prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to
his people
by the forgiveness of their
sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will
break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in
darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way
of peace.*

WOMAN 1

If God has called you, God will be with you, my son.

MAN 1

(joining his wife and son)

Be well, John. *(MAN 3 leaves, out through the audience.)*

WOMAN 1

(calling after him)

What will you eat?

MAN 3

The Lord will provide, Mother.

WOMAN 3

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. He was clothed with camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist

WOMAN 1

And he ate locusts and wild honey.

Scene 2: the ministry of John

WOMAN 3

When I first caught up with John he was baptizing people by the Sea of Galilee. He had a kind of integrity that bordered on obsession, even madness. Crowds of people came out to him and he practically cursed them for their trouble.

MAN 1, MAN 2, WOMAN 1, and WOMAN 2 now represent a crowd of pilgrims who have come out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. He returns to the stage area and harangues them.

MAN 3

You brood of vipers!

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

MAN 3

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

WOMAN 3

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

MAN 3

Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor;” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now, the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The crowd is deeply moved. Finally someone, MAN 1, asks

MAN 1 & MAN 2

What should we do?

WOMAN 1 & WOMAN 2

What should we—

CHORUS

What should we do?

MAN 3

Whoever has two coats should share with anyone who has none

WOMAN 3

This is what I was searching for: a true community

MAN 3

and whoever has food must do likewise.

WOMAN 3

based on caring . . . and sharing. Now even tax collectors, can you believe it, *tax collectors* , who practically invented graft and corruption came to be baptized!

MAN 2

(extremely humble)

Teacher, what should I do?

MAN 3

Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.

WOMAN 3

And soldiers the perpetrators of violence throughout Palestine . . .

MAN 1

And what should I do?

MAN 3

Do not extort money by threats or false accusations

WOMAN 3

He must have been a man of God!

MAN 3

. . . and be satisfied with your wages.

WOMAN 3

I thought he was the Messiah. And so did a lot of other people.

WOMAN 1

Are you . . .

MAN 2 & WOMAN 1

Are you the . . .

MAN 1, WOMAN 1, MAN 2, WOMAN 2 & WOMAN 3

Are you the Messiah?

WOMAN 3

We were filled with expectation.

MAN 3

I baptize you with water

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

MAN 3

but one who is more powerful than I is coming;

WOMAN 3

Prepare the way of the Lord.

MAN 3

I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

WOMAN 3

The prospect of a judge more fearsome than John was a terrifying one. What kind of a monster could this Jesus be? No matter. There were a few of us who had committed our lives to John; there would never be anyone for whom we would leave him. *[Beat]* When John announced we would move southward toward Jerusalem, I made up my mind to say good-bye to my parents, forever, and follow him. I don't know whether they were more sad or ashamed. I hadn't . . . well, let's just say I wasn't what they had hoped and prayed for.

MAN 1

(to WOMAN 1)

What then will this child become?

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

CHORUS

Rejected, ridiculed

WOMAN 3

(to the audience)

First the hearing, then the knowing . . .

CHORUS

suspected, vilified

WOMAN 3

then the wondering, finally accepting

CHORUS

lonely, condemned

WOMAN 3

doubting, praying, saying,

CHORUS

Here am I, Lord, send me.

WOMAN 1

Won't you be hungry, Andrea?

WOMAN 3

Hungry? Often. But the Lord will provide, Mother. *(WOMAN 1 exits)* I couldn't say it to her. Locusts and wild honey.

*Scene 3: The Baptism of Jesus*³

WOMAN 3

After walking for what seemed a week, we finally arrived at Bethany-trans-Jordan.⁴ We were preaching and baptizing in earnest. Word came that Jesus, the fire-breather, was in the area and coming our way. I was more determined than afraid. After all, conflict was a way of life in Palestine. John was filled with what I know now was the Spirit. Jesus arrived. He wanted John to baptize *him!* No monster; he was . . . meek.

The entire company fixes its eyes on a point down center stage. No one is there, but obviously they are looking at Jesus, who has knelt to be baptized. MAN 3 moves forward, takes Jesus by the hand and kneels down with him, as if into the water.

WOMAN 3

So John got into the river with Jesus, took three handfuls of water, and poured them on his head. Then we heard a voice from nowhere . . . and everywhere. It said,

While John and the invisible Jesus are still kneeling, the company says, in unison

CHORUS

You are my Son, the Belovéd; with you I am well pleased.

(Pause.)

WOMAN 3

The feeling at that moment was one of overwhelming warmth -- not hot -- but comforting. As if we had been taken into the arms of God. Jesus arose from the water and began to depart. And with every step he took the air seemed to cool a bit more. [*MAN 2 now walks away from the rest of the CHORUS as if with Jesus.*] Andrew, one of those who had pledged himself to John, followed Jesus away.⁵ He just left us all behind. It's not that I blame him. He was following the warmth. I'd never felt colder myself, but I stayed there, shivering, praying that I could get warm like that again.

³ See Matthew 3:13-17

⁴ John 1:28

⁵ John 1: 37-40

Scene 4: John's Death

WOMAN 3

And still, John was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, crying out even against King Herod's marriage to his own brother Philip's wife.

MAN 3, John, now confronts MAN 2 (Herod) and WOMAN 2 (Herodias).

MAN 3

You, oh King, have taken your brother's wife for yourself. It is contrary to the Law of Moses. An offense in the sight of the Lord.

WOMAN 2

(to MAN 2)

If this man is not silenced, I will make you wish you *hadn't* taken your brother's wife for yourself.

WOMAN 3

It was not what Herod wanted to hear, exactly. He knew that John was a righteous, holy man and he feared him. In a strange way, he liked to listen to John preach. Maybe that's why he kept John, and me, locked up. *(They're in prison, now.)* So he'd always have John around for . . . entertainment? I was one of the last to see John before he . . . died. I had managed to be taken prisoner with him. After nearly a year of following him, in the company of hundreds of others, I was finally able to speak with the Baptist alone.

(long pause)

Do you ever wonder why we're here?

MAN 3

Here? You mean in prison?

WOMAN 3

I guess. *(pause. This is not what she meant but she continues)* Why are you here? The most faithful man I could ever imagine. Why are you in Herod's prison?

MAN 3

I'm here because God-- I'm here because my father read to me from the Scripture.

WOMAN 3

From the Law?

MAN 3

From the prophets, mostly. He loved Isaiah. He based his life, his hope on the words of Isaiah.

WOMAN 3

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

MAN 3

Yes. *(pause)* And, also “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’⁶ And I said,

CHORUS

‘Here am I send me!’”

WOMAN 2

(demanding)

Come and dance for your father, Salomé.

MAN 3

And my mother taught me to listen.

WOMAN 1

Listen to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, who I called:
I am God; I am the first,
and I am the last.
My hand laid the foundation of the
earth,

⁶ Isaiah 6:8

And my right hand spread out the
heavens;
when I summon them,
they stand at attention.⁷

WOMAN 2

Are you listening to me, Salomé? Come and dance for King Herod.

MAN 3

Why are you here? Why are you not with the Messiah?

WOMAN 3

Like Andrew and the others?

MAN 3

Yes.

WOMAN 3

Why did you subordinate yourself to Jesus that day on Jordan's banks?⁸

MAN 3

Subordinate myself?

WOMAN 3

Yes, why isn't your baptism as good as his? Why can't people come to us . . . you for the forgiveness of sins?

MAN 3

Remember that day, Andrea. I was in the water with Jesus. And just as we were coming up on the bank, the heavens opened and a dove descended and hovered over Jesus. And there was a voice from heaven. Remember what it said?

WOMAN 3

(She does remember.)

⁷ Isaiah 48:12-13

⁸ This conversation is suggested by John 3: 25 ff.

No.

MAN 3

It said “You are my son, the Belovéd; with you I am well-pleased.”

WOMAN 1

(as the girl, Salomé)

Mother, the king loved my dancing. He said I could have anything I wanted. What should I ask for?

MAN 3

It was God’s voice, Andrea. It was God who called Jesus, not the other way around. It was God who chose you for baptism. And me. It is God’s voice with the water and in the water that makes the Messiah’s baptism more powerful than mine. *(Pause.)* Why are you here, Andrea? Prepare the way of the Lord.

Two of Herod’s soldiers burst into the cell. They are MAN 1 AND MAN 2.

MAN 1

OK, you, let’s go.

MAN 2

Not you, him! Hey, are you a girl? This is a girl?

MAN 1

Leave it!

MAN 2

Get out of here, if you know what’s good for you.

WOMAN 3

The next hour was the longest of my life.

WOMAN 2⁹

When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

Immediately, she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of his regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Immediately, the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When the disciples heard about it, they came and--

CHORUS

We took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

(Pause.)

Epilogue

To the deserts¹⁰
of the cities

MAN 1

of the suburbs
with their walls

MAN 3

Came John

CHORUS

To the wretched
and the lowly

⁹ The detailed account of John's death comes from Mark 6: 22-29

¹⁰This poem may be recited by all six actors in unison

WOMAN 1

to the mighty
in their halls

MAN 3

Came John

CHORUS

To the preachers
and the pious

MAN 2

to the merchants
in their malls

CHORUS

Where the clamor
and the hurry

WOMAN 2

hide the advent
of the Savior

CHORUS

from the waiting
from the faithful

Where the selfish
and the hateful

WOMAN 3

keep the water
of the Jordan

CHORUS

from the thirsty
from the hurting
from the silent

from the dying
from us all

MAN 3

Came—

The CHORUS now goes out into the audience stopping in various places throughout the auditorium. They speak these lines in the voices of the characters they have played.

WOMAN 3

Who? . . . We took John's body and laid it in a tomb.

MAN 1

Came a prophesy,

WOMAN 1

a child,

WOMAN 3

a hero,

MAN 2

a Holy man,

WOMAN 2

a stranger,

MAN 3

a promise,

MAN 1

a gift,

WOMAN 3

a friend,

WOMAN 2

an enemy,

MAN 3

a voice--

WOMAN 3

. . . stilled by Herod's executioners. We took his body and laid it in a tomb. And I wondered then--

CHORUS

--WHO?

WOMAN 3

And I wonder, now--

CHORUS

--WHO?

WOMAN 3

will prepare the way of the Lord? Now that John is dead--

CHORUS

WHO?

WOMAN 3

--tell me!--will make the paths straight and the rough places smooth?

CHORUS

WHO?

WOMAN 3

--will put on the leather belt and eat locusts and wild honey?

(After a significant pause.)

WOMAN 1

Listen to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, who I called:

WOMAN 3

Me? . . . You? . . . or you? . . . and you?

END