

“John: A Voice in the Wilderness”

MATTHEW 3:1-10

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All around us, we see warnings. This past Friday morning at 3:20, a man on the southwest side of Madison woke up and started banging on his neighbor's door. You see, their compost pile had burst into flames and had ignited the back of their house. A neighbor smelled smoke and went next door to warn them to get out. He then called 911 and grabbed a hose. The homeowner explained on the news that the man had always been a good neighbor, but that this brought it to a whole new level! We see other warnings all around us. As we are driving, we may see a yellow light, warning us to slow down. Maybe we see those flashing gates come down as a train passes by. All of these warnings have something in common, and that is: They tell us that we need to do something to prepare for what is about to happen.

In the Bible, you might remember that Noah warned the world that a flood was coming. Elijah and the other prophets warned the people to turn back to God. Jonah warned the city of Nineveh to repent. With these warnings in mind, I would invite you to study with me the last of the Old Testament prophets who also delivered a powerful warning. However, the story of his life is not found in the Old Testament. His coming is *predicted* in the Old Testament (in the last two verses of the book of Malachi), but the story of his birth and life are actually found in the New Testament. I am referring, of course, to John the Baptist. John was a prophet with a very special mission. He was sent to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah, and his message was simple and very clear. He is described in the Bible as a ***“forerunner;”*** that is, his mission was to “run before,” he was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

Back in ancient times, when a king would travel, a forerunner would get a head start and would go out to warn people that the king was on his way, and so he would help them prepare for the visit. He would advise them to remove fallen trees from the side of the road. He would oversee the repair of the roads coming into town. He would advise them to fill the potholes. He would advise them to get things cleaned up a little bit. A couple of years ago, you might remember that President Obama paid us a visit here in Madison, and you might remember that some special preparations were made for that visit. At that time, my wife was involved in making some special lunches for Wright Middle School—regular school food apparently wasn't good enough! Actually, it was the same food, but they made it look fancy. You might remember that the Secret Service came early and flew in the cars for the motorcade. And then on the day of the visit, police came through and actually shut down the Beltline. They were preparing the way for the coming of the president. In a similar way, a forerunner in the ancient world would prepare the way for the coming of the king, and the Bible says that

John was the forerunner for Jesus. His job was to announce the coming of the Messiah (and warn them) so that the people would be ready.

This morning I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew 3 as we begin to study the ministry of John the Baptist. There has not been a message from God for 400 years. For 400 years, God has been silent—not a word from God from the days of Malachi until the coming of John. Let us, then, look together at Matthew 3:1-10,

¹ Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!’” ⁴ Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; ⁶ and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; ⁹ and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

That is a warning! And as we look at John’s message this morning, I would like for us to learn something from John’s preaching. And yes, his message was for a time before the Law of Christ went into effect; however, the account of John’s life was put into the gospel accounts for a reason. In other words, there is something that we can learn. His message was that the kingdom of heaven is at hand; his message was that the King was coming, that the King was on His way. And because of this, there were some simple but very concrete things that the people were told to do to prepare for the coming of the King, and I would like for that to be the focus of our study this morning.

I. First of all, because the King was on His way, John very clearly preached that the people were to REPENT OF THEIR SINS.

Over and over again, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*** In other words, “The King is coming; therefore, in order to prepare for His coming, you must repent of your sins!” And we find that in response to this very simple message, people were coming from all around to hear the message of repentance. The word ***“repent”*** is very simple. Literally, it means “to think again,” and in practical terms, it means that we have a “second thought” about something we’ve done, it means that we have a change of heart, a change of mind, and in fact (ultimately) that we have a change in our behavior.

Some people may think of repentance in terms of regret or remorse, and yes, that may be part of it, but repentance is more than regret. I say this because all of us probably know situations where someone might wish that they had done something differently, someone might have sorrow over a past decision, and yet they decide to continue in that behavior. Paul discussed the relationship between repentance and regret in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, where he said, ***“I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God***

produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. Paul, therefore, understood that there was a difference between feeling sad about something we've done and feeling sad to the point of doing something about it. To repent, therefore, is to change our behavior. It refers to turning around. It refers to doing a U-turn.

John, therefore, is saying that in order to prepare for the arrival of the King, people must make a decision to change their behavior. And if we have any doubt about this, we can look at Luke's account in Luke 3. In Luke 3:10, ***"...the multitudes were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?'"*** In other words, the crowds wanted some clarification, "Okay, you're telling us to change, but what does that actually mean? What do we do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah?" And in response to that question, John said, ***"Let the man who has two coats share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise."*** That is a solid, concrete action! Now, let me ask: How many coats do you have in your house this morning? The Bible says that some tax collectors also came to be baptized (in Luke 3:12), and they said to John, ***"Teacher, what shall we do?"*** In other words, they knew that before they could be baptized, they needed to do something. They were asking: What do we need to do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah? And John said to the tax collectors, ***"Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."*** You see, tax collectors were sub-contractors to the Roman government. Rome said, "We want you to give us this particular amount, and beyond that, it's up to you." Those contracts went to the highest bidder, and the tax collectors had the Roman army at their disposal. I think you can see a little potential for abuse there, and so John basically said, "You guys need to knock it off! Collect no more than what you have been ordered to collect!" That is what repentance meant for the tax collectors. In Luke 3, the Bible says that some soldiers then came up to John and said, ***"And what about us, what shall we do [to prepare for the coming of the King]?"*** And John said to them, ***"Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."*** Today, John might tell us to be honest at work, to be honest with our customers and suppliers. Today, John might tell us to be honest with our taxes. Today, John might tell us to drive the speed limit. Today, John might tell us to share some of our income with those who have a special need. Today, John might tell us to live by the Golden Rule, treating others as we ourselves would like to be treated. Start being nice to your wife. Move out of your girlfriend's apartment. Repentance, therefore, refers to a change of heart that results in a change in the way we do things. To repent is to change. Turn around, leave your sin, drop it, and go in the opposite direction.

And in case there is any doubt about this, let's notice what happens when some of the Pharisees and Sadducees came out for baptism. The Bible says in Matthew 3:7 that when he saw them coming, John said, ***"You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."*** Back in the day, when crews would come through the fields to harvest the crop, they would sweep through the field picking whatever was there, and then they would often set fire to the field. And apparently, as you can imagine, as that fire swept through the stubble of the field, you could see all kinds of snakes and little critters just scattering in all directions. That is the picture that John is painting here. The religious leaders come out for baptism, and John basically says, "You are doing it for the wrong reasons. You are just like those snakes trying to get away from the fire." Sometimes someone will come for baptism today, and some will say, "Well, we've got to do it. We have no choice. We do not have a right to ask any questions." No! But instead, John says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, John is saying, "You need to prove that you are sincere about this! You are to ***'bear fruit.'***" In other words, "Let us see some change! Let us see some evidence of your change of heart!" You prove your sincerity by the fruit of a changed life.

So, that's the negative example (the Pharisees and the religious leaders). For a positive example, we go back up to verse 6, as we find that many others ***"were being baptized by [John] in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins."*** In other words, their repentance was evidenced by a confession. Our English word

“confession” goes back to Latin and literally means “to speak together with.” In other words, God says, “What you are doing is wrong,” and we say, “Yes, Lord, we agree with you.” We do not defend ourselves, we do not try to explain it away, we do not offer excuses, but we admit to God that what we are doing is, in fact, wrong.

I know we have talked before about what I sometimes refer to as the “non-apology apology.” Have you ever experienced this, when someone says “If I have offended you...”? We see it from public figures in the media all the time, “I’m sorry that some people were offended by what I did.” In other words, they do not admit that what they did was wrong, they just admit that some people didn’t like what they did—the “non-apology apology.” That’s like saying, “I’m sorry your nose was in the way when my fist hit it.” That’s a lot different from saying, “I am so sorry for punching you in the face!” “I’m sorry your nose was in the way” simply puts the blame on the other person, a “non-apology.”

And while we’re on the subject of confession, I would suggest (based on the Scriptures) that we be very specific with our confession. Think about this: If I go to the new police station on Thompson Drive and walk in the front door and say to the officer at the front window, “I did it,” what is the first question he’s going to ask? The officer is going to ask, “What did you do?” In the same way, when we confess our sins to God, let us be specific. The Bible says in 1 John 1:9, ***“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*** John, therefore, very clearly told the people to repent, and many of them did.

II. As John prepared people for the coming of Jesus, there was another part of his message, and that is: JOHN COMMANDED PEOPLE TO BE BAPTIZED.

In fact, baptism was such a part of his message, John came to be known as ***“John the Baptist,”*** or as some translations more accurately put it, ***“John the Immerser.”*** There are other Johns in the Bible, so to distinguish between them, the John we are talking about this morning is known for what he did; that is, he went around immersing people, lots of people, thousands upon thousands of people. Some people may see the name ***“John the Baptist”*** and may assume that John was a member of the denominational “Baptist” church, but that is definitely not the case. The Baptist denomination traces its roots to 1609 in Amsterdam. John, then, was not a Baptist in any kind of denominational sense, he was not even a member of the Lord’s church (it was not even in existence yet), but he is referred to as John the Baptist or John the Immerser, because that is what he was known for doing; he was known for immersing people.

In fact, God sent him into this world for the purpose of immersing people. We read about this in John 1:29-34,

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ 31 I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.” 32 John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. 33 I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ 34 I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

John, therefore, was sent by God ***“to baptize in water,”*** so that the Lord ***“might be manifested to Israel.”*** In other words, John’s baptism was to look forward to Jesus. Paul tells us that our baptism looks back to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. With that in mind, I think it would be safe to say that John’s baptism

looked forward to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, 3-½ years later, when Jesus died, and was buried, and was raised, a lot of people out there would be able to say, “Oh yeah! That’s what I did! That’s what happened to me!”

We can learn even more about John’s baptism by looking ahead to John 3:23 where we find that **“John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized.”** In other words, John could not just preach anywhere, but he chose to preach in one particular place because the Jordan River was deeper there than in other places. John, then, did not sprinkle people with water, but he immersed them in water. We read more about John’s baptism in the opening verses of the book of Mark,

¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; ³ THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’” ⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

So, we learn here that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance **“for the forgiveness of sins.”** I hope that sounds familiar, because that is what our baptism is for. We are not baptized to “join a church,” we are not baptized to show that we have already been saved, but we are baptized **“for the forgiveness of sins.”** We are dipped in water so that our sins can be forgiven. I should point out here: If you were baptized for some other reason, or if you think you were saved before your baptism, we need to talk about that, because it represents a misunderstanding of what baptism really is.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have learned that John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. God’s prophets had been completely silent for 400 years, and then this locust and honey-eating camel-hair wearing prophet shows up out of nowhere with a message of repentance and baptism because the King, the Messiah, was about to arrive, a voice crying out in the wilderness.

Lord willing, I would like for us to study John again next Sunday morning, but for now, let’s just fast forward several years to the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. When Peter got up to speak, those thousands of people assembled there in the temple would have heard a very familiar message. Peter basically said: You people killed Jesus. He died, He was buried, and He was raised up on the third day. The people interrupted that sermon and said, **“What shall we do?”** And Peter answered and said, **“Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** On that day, 3,000 people accepted Peter’s message and were baptized. My understanding is that they were then added to those who had already been baptized by John.

So how about those of us gathered here this morning? Does John have any words for us? 2,000 years later, the King has already come and the kingdom is here; however, the message is basically the same. The King is coming back, and we prepare for His arrival by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water. If John were with us this morning, he would say, “Repent and be baptized, because the

King is coming back!" If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to be immersed into the death of Christ right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com