

John the Baptist

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[0 : 00] I would like you to go with me today in your imagination to the banks of the River Jordan. The River Jordan is a river which looms very large in the history of God's people.

And we see there a huge crowd and they gathered around a strange looking man, a rough looking man from the country. And this man is speaking in a thunderous tone of voice and he's calling on the people to repent.

He points out they sin both as a nation and as individuals. And he climaxes his message by crying out, repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And we read that in Matthew's account. At first people were astonished. They didn't feel they needed repentance.

Weren't they descendants of Abraham? Weren't they God's chosen people? Didn't they worship in the temple?

[1 : 21] Didn't they observe all the feast days? Who was this man telling them to repent? But the preacher said, You may call yourselves children of Abraham, but the religion of your forefathers will not save you.

And then he began to name their personal sins. And suddenly many of them saw themselves as God sees them.

Many of them saw themselves in God's sight. They saw themselves as sinning against a holy God. And they crowded around the preacher.

And they confessed their sins. And then they were baptized by John in the River Jordan. So who was this strange preacher?

A strange and mighty preacher. Who had such power that he made whole towns empty themselves and flock to hear him.

[2 : 42] Well, we know who he is, don't we? We know that he is John the Baptist. The forerunner of Jesus Christ. And where did he come from?

Well, if you remember the introduction that we had in our reading today. It tells us that John was a man sent from God.

There can be no more powerful introduction to anyone than that. There was a man sent from God. And his name was John.

He was fearless in his denunciation of sin. He was a mighty preacher. He was a tremendous success. He was all of these.

But first of all, he was a man sent from God. And that was the most important thing of all.

[3 : 52] God has sent many men and women. But there has never been one about whom Jesus said, Among them that are born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.

And there was a massive response to John's ministry. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that Herod became alarmed by the size of the crowds.

And he feared that John's movement might turn into a political revolution. So he had John jailed and executed. John's ministry was not a minor incident in one small corner of Judea.

It was a national event. And John was preparing all of the people for the coming of the Messiah.

And there was nothing unforeseen in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Because all through the Old Testament, we find that the coming of the Messiah was foretold with increasing clearness.

[5 : 20] It was a promise to the patriarchs, and it was repeated to the prophets, that a deliverer and a redeemer would come. His birth, his character, his life, his death, his resurrection, and his forerunner were all prophesied long, long before he came.

Isaiah, 700 years before John, was telling us what John would be doing. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that John is the one.

That Isaiah is talking about. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord, says Isaiah.

Well, God's sense of time is not our sense of time. We humans have created clocks and calendars and timers.

We have measurable time. Kronos kind of time. But God operates on Kyrios time, which is holy moments, moments of fulfillment, moments of truth.

[6 : 48] And we read, with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. God is operating on a different system to us.

And the Jews had been waiting a long time for the coming of the Messiah. And they thought that John had possibilities to be the one.

So they sent the priests and the Levites from Jerusalem to check him out. And that whole passage from 19 to 28 reads to me like some TV game shows, with John the Baptist being questioned by a panel of celebrity judges, all trying to find out who he is, what he is doing, and what it all means.

They are trying to find out who he is, what he is doing, and what it all means. In the UK, many, many years ago, there was a show called To Tell the Truth.

And in this show, a panel of celebrity questioners would face a panel of three contestants, with all three claiming to be the same person.

[8 : 17] And the challenge was to see whether they could work out by asking questions which of the three was the real one. And of course, the three played it very close to their chest, trying not to reveal too much.

And John's celebrity questioners, the priests and the Levites, sent from the Pharisees in Jerusalem, are asking questions, and trying to find out who John really is.

Are you Elijah, they ask? A prophet, an imposter? And John plays it close to his chest, saying more of who he is not, rather than who he is.

Well, at the end of that game, the announcer would say, would the real Joe Blow stand up? And of course, one of the contestants would, and the confusion would give rise to clarity.

And we can only imagine that the Pharisees wish someone would stand up and clear things up about John. And a variation of Tell the Truth was What's My Line?

[9 : 43] And this was a game that was up to the panelists through questions to work out the occupation of one of the contestants, who did their best to confuse the celebrities.

The studio and the TV audiences would know what the panelists didn't know. And that was what the contestants' line or the contestants' occupation was.

And that show was funny because the celebrities were so often off target and they were unable to see what to us was so obvious.

And the contestant, if the contestant could keep it that way, he or she would win the money. And in the same way, we already know who John is.

He is a witness sent by God to testify to the light. One who has come to proclaim the advent of the Savior.

[10 : 54] And the questioners in our reading are very confused. They're unable to see what we already know. They are unable to see what seems to be so obvious.

They know something of what John is doing, but they do not know what it means, or more precisely, what his real job is. And they are off target.

Why are you baptizing? They say. Who are you? What do you say about yourself? And you get the sense that John has the money in the bag.

And the last game show was on TV not so long ago, and it was called Jeopardy. And this is a show where the host actually gives the answer, and the contestants supply the question.

And if they get the question right, they win the prize. John has given his questioners the answer, but it seems they have got the question wrong.

[12 : 12] their answer seems to be, where is the Messiah? When John tells them, among you stands one whom you do not know.

Their question seems to be, where is the Messiah? Well, he was in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. But that is the wrong question.

The real question is not, where is he so that we might see him? The real question is, who is he so we might follow him? John says, among you stands one whom you do not know.

And the real question should be, who is he that we might follow him? And so, as in the TV game shows, we feel sorry for those unfortunate contestants who seem to have missed out on the grand prize.

the coming of the Messiah was being announced by John. His job was to prepare the people of his day.

[13 : 25] But his ministry also prepares us today. And Advent is a time of preparation for us as we wait for the second coming of Christ.

And we need to use this time in Advent wisely and bring our lives before God. John was preparing the way of Christ by preparing the hearts and the lives of the people.

people. And we too must examine our motives. We must examine our behavior. We must allow ourselves to ask the hard questions.

Am I a person of self-control? Am I a person who is faithful? Are we a godly group of people?

Are we increasing in our loving behavior towards one another and to the world? And in Advent, John calls each one of us to name our sins before God and to repent.

[14 : 52] One of the things I noticed as Matthew finishes his text on John. And he seems to finish it in a seemingly strange way by saying that John proclaimed the good news to the people.

John proclaimed the good news to the people. And it struck me as being strange. How is it that John's message, with all his name calling, with all his threats, with all his warnings, can still be labeled good news.

good news. Well, it's because the bad news of God's judgment points to or implies the good news of God's mercy.

Imagine that you're going to the doctor for a routine examination, and as far as you know, you are perfectly healthy. You don't recognize that there are any serious symptoms, that there is nothing really wrong with you.

And so when the tests come back, and the doctor sits you down, and tells you that the examination shows that you have diabetes, this is bad news.

[16 : 26] This is bad news. bad news. If you don't drastically change your eating habits, there will be dire circumstances.

Now, this is bad news. But at the same time, there is good news implied in the bad news, because that is that your condition is not hopeless.

Something can be done. It may be tough to make adjustments, but there is still hope of a full and fruitful life. And with God, every apparent bad word about judgment implies a good word about salvation.

The divine warnings are given so that divine mercy might be accepted. Judgment is a way that God shows his care for us.

If God were uncaring, he'd simply abandon us without any notice. The word of God is painful just as the way of surgery is painful.

[17 : 48] The pain it causes is just a step on the way to health. There's a story I like about this little boy.

I like it because I think I've done it so many times myself. But this little boy was acting up at the dinner table and he stood up on his chair and despite being told by his mother to sit down, he continued to stand on the chair.

So finally she came round behind him and she forced him to sit down. And after squirming for a time, he finally sat still.

But he said defiantly, I may be sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside.

And I think many of us are like that. Many of us are defiantly insisting on our own way, when all the time God is waiting to give us so much more, if we trust him, if we obey, and obey him in his way for us.

[19 : 14] have you ever known someone who had an illness but who refused to go to the doctor?

We do. They refuse to go to the doctor because they don't believe they've got a problem. you have to admit that there is a problem before you seek assistance from outside of yourself.

Confession of sin is an acknowledgement that we have fallen short of God's will in our life.

Confession is admitting that you have a problem.

it is admitting that there is a spiritual sickness within you that requires the help of God.

And only in confession can we find God's forgiveness and God's healing. And after our spiritual surgery comes the convalescence.

[20 : 36] we wait peacefully for the body to heal itself. And this is the way that we are to spend Advent.

Preparing ourselves. Staying alert to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Cooperating with its nourishment.

cleansing. Cooperating with the cleansing. And then resting in peace. Resting in peace because we know that it is God who is working in us.

Amen. and thank you. fan of thanks to this started by icki