Water and Fire (Evening Service)

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0:00] Well, we're working through Matthew's Gospel at this service, and it will be very helpful if you have your Bibles open to Matthew 3 that we just read together. Matthew 3. More than 60 years ago, in May of 1957, Billy Graham had his longest and most significant crusade, American crusade, and it was in New York City.

The 16-week evangelism campaign, it was attended by over 2 million people. And to prepare for Graham's visit, the organizing committee, well, they sent people actually to New York City more than a year beforehand to settle in and live there.
And so these folks, they moved into neighborhoods, and in these neighborhoods they launched prayer meetings, and they started training counselors and training people who would work during the campaign all across the city.
They made arrangements with local media. They set up interviews, press conferences. They met with civic groups and local churches. And they blanketed the city with mass advertising.
Handbills, billboards, bumper stickers, bus ads, you name it. They did all of this in preparation. And then in May of 1957, Billy arrived and he began that 16-week preaching ministry, which went on to bear tremendous fruit.
[1:24] Well, the preparation, though, it was impressive, but it was never meant to be the goal. It was not the purpose. It was not the main event. In fact, the real purpose was all for pointing a spotlight on the man who was coming in May.

And when I was looking at Matthew 3 this week, I was thinking about how this is a chapter of preparation. A chapter of preparation. How John the Baptist is the one that we see is sent by God to prepare his people for the man who is coming.
But it's also a chapter of arrival, of fulfillment. We get to see in the very same little story here both preparation and fulfillment.
Because here, for the very first time in Matthew, the adult Jesus enters the story. And what I want you to listen for is this. I want you to listen for three voices.
And these three voices together, they declare the gospel to us. They announce that Jesus has arrived to bring salvation and justice. And they announce that through Jesus' identity, we, in fact, receive a glorious new identity which never fails us.
[2:43] So there's three voices, and that makes it very simple for us to look at this under three simple headings. John speaks. Then Jesus speaks. And then God the Father speaks.

Three voices. Let's start with John. Look with me at chapter 3, verse 1. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Repent for the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven.
They're synonymous. They mean the same. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.
Make his paths straight. We've fast-forwarded about 30 years since Matthew chapter 2. And this is a big deal. Because God has been silent for 400 years.
And now at last, a prophet sent from God speaks for the first time. Can you imagine God being silent for 400 years? And John's message, it's really quite simple.
[3:46] Get ready because the king is coming. So get ready. Verse 4 continues the description. John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist.

His food was locusts and wild honey. And when Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan was going out to him, they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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So John's got this haute couture wardrobe, right? And it's meant to remind us, not of his fashion sense, but actually it's a reminder of Israel's greatest prophet. His name was Elijah.
You can read about him in 1 Kings. And then fast forward to the very last book of the Old Testament. In fact, the book that's right before Malachi, right before Matthew. It's called Malachi. The last Old Testament book in which the Lord declared that he was going to send a prophet like Elijah who would prepare God's people for salvation and judgment.
[4:45] So now we have John the Baptist, the fulfillment of Elijah. And how then should Israel get ready?

To find the answer, we need to look closer at four images that John uses here. Four images. The road, the water, the axe, and the fire.
Road, water, axe, and fire. Let's start with road. Look at verse 3. We've already read it. Prepare the way of the Lord, the road of the Lord. Make his path straight. Well, this image comes from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40.
You may recognize it from Christmas service if you've ever been to church at Christmas. It pictures a derelict highway. It's in need of renovation. And there's people kind of urgent.
There's an urgency to it because the king is going to travel on that highway. And it better not look worn down. Prepare the way. Prepare the road. And verse 2 says, repent.
[5:47] In other words, turn to the Lord with your heart. And verse 8 continues. It says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Which means don't just say the right religious things.

Start doing them. Because real repentance always means a complete and lasting change of not only your heart, but also your actions. So that's the road.
And next he likes to use the image of the water. And we see this in verse 5 and 6 and then again in verse 11. Verse 5 and 6, look with me. It tells us that John was baptizing people in the Jordan River. And Jerusalem and all Judea and all the regions. So people from all over Israel are coming out to be baptized, confessing their sins. Well, baptism for repentance, it's a brand new thing for Jews. And this isn't Christian baptism that's happening here. It's not like the baptism we see after Pentecost. It's a symbolic washing with water as a sign of true repentance, getting ready for the Messiah.
[6:53] But then in verse 7 we're introduced to a group of people who don't think that they need repentance. Which brings us to the third image, the axe. Look at verse 7 with me.

But when he, John, saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.
And do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.
Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The image here is of the family tree of Israel. So these Pharisees and these Sadducees, these are just two groups of Jewish leaders in the first century.
And they were both very proud of their status as religious leaders and examples for the community. Those Sadducees, well, they enjoyed both economic prosperity and political security by getting in bed with the Romans.
[8:01] And the Pharisees, they enjoyed moral superiority by going above and beyond the Jewish Old Testament law and making sure that everyone knew it.

And John has some kind words for them. Incidentally, I think John would make a great dinner guest. Wouldn't it be awesome? John says, you think you're better than everyone else.
And you don't need to get ready for what's coming, but you're wrong. You look religious on the outside. You've got all the right clothes on. You say all the right things. But inside your heart, you're just a pack of snakes.
You see, the Jews as a people, they enjoyed a special identity as the covenant children of Abraham. So when I go back to that image of the family tree, the family tree that they grew on, it contained all the promises of God.
Every possible blessing. And so because as a result of that, there's a sense of entitlement that begins to creep in for some of these Jews. Some of these Pharisees and these Sadducees.

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[9:09] And John is warning them that an axe is going to come to that tree. That an axe of God's judgment, it will cut down every tree that does not bear fruit.

I think Jack and the beanstalk there. And then finally, the fire. From the axe to the fire. And here we see this in verse 10b and verse 11.
Have a look at verse 10. And every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And it continues like this. I baptize you, John says, with water for repentance. But he who is coming after me, he is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn.
But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Verse 11 is actually the first clear mention of Jesus in chapter 3.
[10:13] He's described as the one who is coming after me who is mightier than I. That's Jesus. So if John's baptism is merely going to be a baptism of water, well then Jesus' baptism, he says, will be Holy Spirit and fire.

And the image here is first of a purifying fire. A fire that refines and it cleans every human heart that turns to the Lord in repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit and fire.
But there's also a judging fire here. And we see that clearly at the end of verse 12. When he says, the chaff, that's the, you know, on the farm, that's the stuff that's useless.
Not the wheat, but the chaff. The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. John is saying here that salvation, there's an image here of salvation and judgment.
Two sides of one coin that we must always hold together. We have to hold it together because the Bible always holds it together. Salvation and judgment. Friends, John's voice, it's pretty punchy, right?
[11:19] And it speaks a message that begins with this joyful anticipation, but it also has this deep warning for us tonight. John speaks and he says, get ready, repent.

The king is coming. The king is in fact here. And his voice is the first voice we must hear if we're going to be ready to hear the second voice.
And that's the voice of Jesus himself. So secondly, Jesus speaks. And here we begin at verse 13. Have a look. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him.
It's kind of a surprise though, isn't it? It's meant to shock us. It's totally anticlimactic. John has been really hyping up this guy that's coming. He's going to be mightier than me.
I can't even stoop down and tie his sandals. I mean, I can't even do what a slave would do for him. He's so much greater than I. And here he finally arrives and he's come to be baptized by John.
[12:22] Just like all the other people that are in line. So John clearly doesn't think this is right, which is why in verse 14 he says, it says that John would have prevented Jesus saying, I need to be baptized by you and you would be baptized.

You would come to me to be baptized? The greater should not submit to the lesser. Why does Jesus need to be baptized? Especially if he's, you know, as Christians we often talk about how Jesus is supposed to have no sin, right?
I thought this was a baptism for repentance. Why does Jesus have to be baptized? Yet Jesus is emphatic. In fact, we know this part of the story is so important because it brings out Jesus' first ever words in the Gospels.
And incidentally, if you're reading the four Gospels, look for in each Gospel Jesus' first words are different. And they're always very important. And in Matthew, his first words go like this. Verse 15. Jesus answered him, And then John consented. It's crystal clear, right?
[13:32] Yeah. I mean, they're kind of puzzling words, especially as the first thing that Jesus would say. Okay? So let's unpack. Let's unpack this kind of cryptic saying by looking at the two most important words.

Fulfill and righteousness. Fulfill and righteousness. First, fulfill. So fulfill has this idea of bringing to reality or to accomplish. And it's used, it's a very important word in Matthew.
It's used 16 times. We've already come across it in chapter 1 and 2. It's always used to refer to the Old Testament. And we hear it in saying things like, This was to fulfill what was spoken by such and such prophet.
And then there's a quote from that prophet. Well, what's happening here at this baptism is that it's a fulfillment of God's promises and his plan from the very beginning.

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And it's a fulfillment of John's ministry as well. He says, do you notice Jesus says, For us to fulfill all righteousness. It's a beautiful coming together of John's ministry. The climax of John's ministry is the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
[14:34] For us to fulfill all righteousness. So what is the second word, righteousness? What the heck's that about? Well, in Matthew's gospel, again, this is a word he loves. He uses it about 21 times in different forms.

It means, listen carefully to this. This is important. It means perfect obedience to a covenantal relationship with God. Righteousness is a perfect obedience to a covenantal relationship with God. So listen to some famous verses from Matthew. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
So back to our question. Why did Jesus want to be baptized? Why did Jesus have to be baptized? The answer? To fulfill all righteousness. Or to say it more plainly, in baptism, Jesus chose to identify himself with the repentant people of God in order to fulfill his mission.
It was the first step, actually, in preparing for his role as the one who came to bear our weaknesses and give his life as a ransom for many through shedding his blood on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.
[15:53] Jesus' death would actually be the climactic moment of righteousness in his ministry, of perfect obedience to his covenantal relationship with God. And in so doing, he broke the curse of sin and death.

He restored the broken relationship between us and God. He gave his righteousness as a gift to us so that we might receive life. So John agrees to baptize Jesus.
He thinks, okay, it must be a good thing. Well, it's turned out to be a good thing. John's mission is accomplished. He steps back into the background, and Jesus steps forward into the spotlight.
And as the spotlight shines on Jesus, we hear the third voice. God the Father speaks. And these are the last two verses, verses 15 and 16.
And the first thing we notice in these verses is that they're Trinitarian. That we see God the Father, and God the Son, Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God.
[16:54] And we see that they come together in unity and cooperation, and to support one another. In fact, the Father and the Spirit come to support Jesus. You could say that God the Father speaks a word of commissioning, and words of assurance to his beloved Son, as he begins his ministry.

And he does this with two direct quotes from the Old Testament. Two quotes from the Old Testament. In your Bible, it reads like this.
In verse 17, This is my beloved Son, with whom I'm well pleased. We'll break that into two. The first half, This is my beloved Son. That's a direct quote from Psalm 2, verse 7.
It's a messianic psalm, which is all about the anointed King, the Son of God, who's going to come to save and to rule the nations. And then the Father continues.
He says, With whom I am well pleased. Well, that comes not from Psalm 2. It comes from Isaiah 42, verse 1. And that's a section of Isaiah, from chapter 40 to chapter 55, which speaks of a unique person that is being sent from God, who's called the servant.
[18:06] And the servant is the one who brings righteousness for God's people. But this is the interesting detail in Isaiah. How does he bring righteousness for his people?

He does this by dying in our place. He is, in fact, the suffering servant, we discover. Isaiah 53 says, He is pierced for our transgressions and wounded so that we're healed.
So, for the very first time in all of human history, these two characters in the Bible who have never been brought together, one from Psalm, the anointed king and God's son, and one from Isaiah, the suffering servant, they're brought together for the very first time into the person of Jesus Christ as God the Father speaks his blessing onto his son.
And there's even more. The very best part is still to come. Because the gift that's being offered to you and I tonight is not merely the free gift of righteousness.
That all sounded pretty great. That Jesus would fulfill all righteousness and that he would offer that to us as a gift, that's fantastic. But even more than that, we see in this verse 17 that in fact, the gift that's being offered to us is the sharing of Christ's identity as that beloved child of God.

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[19:26] Let me unpack that for you. What I'm saying is that when we turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, because Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness, because he is the beloved son of God first, because he is the one in whom the Father delights, you and I are the beloved.

Your heavenly Father says to you, I'm delighted in you because of what Jesus has done. When Christ fulfilled all righteousness for us on the cross, he restored that glorious relationship that was lost so many thousands of years ago in the Garden of Eden.
He restores that relationship as beloved sons and daughters of God. And so it's this identity that actually sustains us in times of testing, which is exactly what we're going to see in Matthew chapter 4 when Jesus goes into the wilderness.
That very same identity that we receive, it sustains us in times of testing. We'll hear more about that next week. But tragically, it is very possible for us to refuse this gift and insist on continuing instead as children of Abraham, who would rather strive and work on our own strength and who declare, you know what?
I don't need to repent. I don't need to get ready. My path is already straight. Amen. Well, as we wrap up tonight, we go back to Billy Graham's visit to New York City in the summer of 1957.
[21:00] And those two million people who heard the gospel, it had a tremendous impact on that city. Over 60,000 people came forward in repentance and faith and decided to follow Jesus during that summer.

And it all began with that preparation in the background. That preparation which bore much fruit. We've heard three voices in Matthew 3. We've heard the voice of John, the voice of preparation. And I love how punchy John is. How, you know, we need this kind of direct and confrontational tone sometimes to help us to get ready, to actually help us to be honest with the Lord.
He breaks through those barriers. And I hope that he's done that for you tonight. But we also, friends, we need to hear the voice of the Father. To hear the gospel of peace that declares that we're righteous and we're set free.
This is the gift for you, that you're a child of God. And if you've never heard that before, if nobody's ever said to you, I love you, you're my beloved child, I hope that you'll hear it for the very first time from your heavenly Father tonight.
[22:05] Because when you hear that, as one who is in Christ, you are beloved. And it's in you that he takes delight. Amen.

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