

Called to Prepare the Way  
December 27, 2020  
Matthew 3

Today's Bible Study lesson looks at John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin. In Luke we read of the Angel telling Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, John's mother, is in her sixth month (Luke 1:36). Jesus began his ministry at about age 30 (Luke 3:23), and the same would have been true of John. All four gospels begin their narrative of Jesus's ministry with reference to John the Baptist. This connection seems to have been very important in the early church.

When John appeared, the "voice of prophesy" was considered to have gone out from Israel. The last of the recognized prophets was Malachi, final book included in the "Book of the Twelve." These books are sometimes referred to as the "Minor Prophets" since their writings were all included on one scroll in the Jewish scriptures. In contrast, the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah each had a scroll to itself. Between the time of Malachi and the first century, the books of prophesy came to be regarded as scripture. When Jesus refers to scripture, as in Matthew 5:17, he uses "The Law and the Prophets." Some of the later prophets were reluctant to identify themselves as such. For example, Amos said, when confronted, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees..." (Amos 7:14). Interestingly, the post-exilic prophet Zechariah has a prophesy that prophesy will cease (Zechariah 13:2-5). Malachi, the last of the prophets included in scripture (about 400 B.C.), includes the prophesy of the coming of Elijah before the coming of the "great and terrible day of the Lord." (Malachi 4:5).

John the Baptist appeared, speaking and acting like a prophet greatly resembling Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8). His habitation in the Wilderness of Judea, west of the Dead Sea and up into the area around Jericho, and his subsistence diet of foods found in that wilderness, also resembled Elijah, who subsisted in hiding for quite a while (1 Kings 17:2-6). John's message of the impending coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was consistent with the prophesy of Malachi. It seemed that something big was about to happen. Very big. Apocalyptic big. John was fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah 40:3, saying, "**Prepare the Way of the Lord; make his paths straight.**"

In that time, roads were really just paths that men, animals, and sometimes carts or wagons traveled from one point to another. They followed routes that convenience and topology had dictated from of old. It wasn't until the Romans that

roads were systematically constructed and maintained for strategic purposes. Many of those Roman roads endure to our day. In Solomon's time, there was a system of roads paved with basalt leading to Jerusalem for the use of the king, the king's agents and armies, and travelers (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 8.7.4). We don't know the extent, or whether these roads were actually maintained. I've encountered no reference to them elsewhere. So, if someone wanted a straight road or path, it had to be built. That was not the norm.

What could be done to prepare? John told the people, "Repent!" Repentance could be demonstrated by baptism. Those who repented were baptized as a sign of that repentance. Many people went out to see John and receive baptism as a sign of their repentance. The use of the Greek "imperfect" verb in verse 5 implies a continuous or repeated process.

The word "repent" here is deeper than we normally think of in English. The Jewish word for repentance is derived from a word meaning "to turn". (I've drawn this and what follows from Barclay, *Commentary on Matthew* vol 1.) "Repentance is a turning away from evil, toward God. ... The essence of repentance is such a thorough change of mind that it issues in a change of life and conduct." The Jewish scholar Maimonides wrote, "Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin and puts it away out of his thoughts and fully resolves in his mind that he will not do it again; as it is written, 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the bad man his plans.'" Repentance was not just for a particular deed, and once done, removed any obligations.

You might be wondering, why baptism? Baptism was a rite in a proselyte becoming a Jew. The famous rabbi Hillel regarded it as the decisive ceremony of conversion to Judaism. If that's the sense of baptism by John, being baptized amounts to admitting one is no better than a heathen before God, and must begin again, in needing forgiveness of sins. Another, and compatible, meaning can be taken from God's words conveyed in Ezekiel 36:25-26: (Similar: Isaiah 1:16-17)

**"25 I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."**

I think the lesson-writer misses the mark when she writes, "John encouraged repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which frustrated the Jewish leaders - the Pharisees and Sadducees - because they believed it was possible to obey God fully.

In their view, no repentance would be needed because obedience could and should be perfect.” I agree that John encouraged repentance. But concerning the Jewish leaders, I think this is wrong. The Sadducees, the party that controlled the Temple and profited from its operations, benefitted from the atonement sacrifices bought and sacrificed there. They had a vested interest in sinfulness. The sacrifice animals had to be inspected and approved. There was a whole system dedicated to providing satisfactory animals, a system that the Sadducees controlled. It wasn’t just for convenience that animals were brought in to the Temple and sold there for this purpose. Someone bringing in his own animal from elsewhere would likely find it rejected. (This is the system that Jesus revolted against when he “cleansed” the Temple.) So they saw John as, in effect, running a competing operation, that promised forgiveness through merely baptism. John would not have been charging the penitents anything for it! Free grace! How outrageous! The Pharisees were not so involved in the Temple. They elevated the concern for righteousness. But they too would seemingly have been concerned about the availability of cheap grace.

When the Sadducees and Pharisees came, John recognized that they were there to check him out and decide what to do about him, just as they would later during Jesus’s ministry. Was John a threat? Herod (Antipas) thought so. Josephus reports “Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod , who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause ...” Later on, the destruction of Herod’s army by the king of Petra was thought by many Jews to be God’s judgment on Herod for killing John the Baptist. (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.2). So, in this case, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn’t have to act against John themselves, as they did later against Jesus (John 11:46-53)

John recognized the Pharisees and Sadducees for what they were. John’s image of vipers and other small animals fleeing before a fire was something my mother witnessed as a child. The natives in the Congo would clear a field for planting by setting fires, which would burn away the existing vegetation. All manner of small animals would flee from the fire, and the natives were prepared to catch any that sought to escape. These animals served as a source of “bush meat” that was part of the diet. My mother and the other children at the mission would sometimes barter for one these animals and take them as pets. On one occasion they adopted a wild black footed kitten in that way. My mother said they loved that kitten to death. The poor kitten couldn’t withstand all the attention the children

gave it, and died. The children, staged a “madila” for it, a native funeral, with much wailing and crying. They were commanded by their elders, “No more madilas!” It was explained that, as Christians, we have hope in the Resurrection, so it is not necessary to mourn and cry in that manner.

John’s message was serious. “Who warned you?” carries an element of doubt at the sincerity of the repentance being offered as a prerequisite for baptism. John warns them that they must bear fruit that befits repentance. There was a belief among at least some Jews that, as Children of Abraham, there was a vast store of God’s goodwill credited to Abraham, on which they were entitled to draw without exhaustion. John warns them that merely being children of Abraham will not save them. If they profess repentance but do not in fact turn back to God, and act in a matter that bears fruit, they will be cut down as a worthless tree is, and thrown into the fire. Finally, John warns in verse 11, that he is not the agent of God’s judgment on sinners. He only baptizes with water. It’s not magic. It’s only a sign that the sinner has truly repented, and has turned back to God. But the one who is coming is greater. “He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

John’s message is a warning in the spirit of Elijah and Amos of coming judgment. The phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” was used to avoid saying “Kingdom of God,” using the Holy name. It was clear what was meant. The expectation was that the “great and terrible Day of the Lord” was at hand, as prophesied in numerous places. The passage in Joel quoted by Peter at Pentecost after the Resurrection is one of the most vivid:

**Joel 2: <sup>30</sup>“And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. <sup>31</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. <sup>32</sup>And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls. (RSV)**

Jesus began his ministry with baptism by John. John recognized him. Matthew reports this with the continuation of the scripture reading through the end of Chapter 3. The baptism is followed by the temptations and Jesus’s ministry in Galilee.

One of the questions the lesson writer asks is, “How do you think John responded when he heard Jesus’ preaching about grace?” We know the answer.

John sent disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:2-3). John was expecting the kind of Messiah that would put all things right, the kind of thing we expect at the “Second Coming” as anticipated by the *Revelation of John*, at the conclusion of the New Testament. It was what most Jews expected the Messiah to be. It is the kind of Messiah the devil tempted Jesus to be, in the wilderness after his baptism. But God’s plan was greater, and grander.

This is not the first such surprise we meet in the scriptures. There is an interesting parallel to Elijah and the prophet who followed him, Elisha. Elijah, like John the Baptist, was a prototypical prophet, bringing warnings of doom to the King, living in the wilderness, and speaking words of God’s anger for sinfulness. Elisha was a pivot into a completely different direction. He was wealthy. He didn’t challenge kings. He did services for more common people, but even on an occasion a Syrian officer! His ministry seems to have been the origin of independent groups of prophets, “sons of prophets.” As I read 1 and 2 Kings, God seems to have given up on the Israelite kingship (the Northern Kingdom). But He didn’t give up on its people. Other prophets later, for example Hosea and Amos, didn’t go to the king, but gave their messages to the people. In a much more important way, Jesus was not just merely the messianic salvation of the Jews. God pivoted in a manner completely unexpected. Jesus came for everybody. John was faithful to God’s calling to him. He didn’t understand Jesus’s mission. But he was important to it. So, let us not be discouraged by the events of our times, even when religious or secular authorities seem to have lost their way, and doom seems to be approaching. God is there, and He will be there for us in our hour of need.

*Prayer: God of truth and holiness, help us see our lives accurately and identify the places – thoughts, actions, relationships – where good fruit is absent. Help us to turn to you for forgiveness and find the strength to follow you. Amen.*

P.S. I’m trying to get this out to you, faithful members of our class, before Christmas. As you see, our lessons are leaving the Christmas story behind as we look at Jesus’s call to his ministry in Luke and the other gospels in the weeks ahead. I do hope that even despite the restrictions of the current days you all enjoy a blessed Christmas. We all look forward to 2021 hoping for relief from these current restrictions, and the joys of in-person fellowship, in the year to come.