

December 5, 2010
Advent 2

"John the Baptist, a Voice Crying in the Wilderness"

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" ⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

It is amazing how the Lord can suddenly bring about changes in the lives of people where we least expect change to take place. When I was serving in Tucson, a woman shared with me how frustrated she was at her husband who refused to come to church with her. About a year later we had a second pastor come on board to help with the growth that was taking place. He built up a friendship with this man, shared God's Word with him and he started showing up in worship. Eventually he took classes, was baptized and became an active communicant member of the church.

The Lord can certainly bring about changes in people when we least expect it. So it was the large number of people who came out to hear the preaching of John the Baptist in the Jordan Valley northeast of Jerusalem. Their lives were changed by the message of repentance that John shared with them as he talked to them about the kingdom of God and Jesus their Savior. They came confessing their sins. They went home believing John's words about Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Today we want to think of this voice crying in the wilderness, this amazing voice of John the Baptist. As we look at this voice this morning want to see how the Lord chose the right moment, the right man, and the right message to change the lives of many people. He is still doing the same for us today.

The Lord has the right moment

It was the Lord who chose the right moment for John to begin preaching in the desert valley east of Jerusalem. "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" What were those days like? They were the worst of times and the best of times. The iron fist of Rome ruled Palestine. Pontius Pilate was governor. Herod, the despised Idumean, was king. Religious fanatics such as the Pharisees controlled the religious scene. Yet these were also the best of times. For this was the time the Lord our God had appointed from all eternity to introduce Jesus, His Son, the Messiah, to the world.

The Lord our God always has his best time to bring his Word into your life and my life. Ecclesiastes tells us, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every purpose under heaven." I am holding in my hand a small MP3 player that is being sent to soldiers who are serving our country. They can simply push a button and listen to God's Word. God's Word is available online. It can be downloaded to a smart phone for easy access and the words can be seen on the screen as the Word is being heard. How true are the words of Romans 10 that tell us "The sound has gone out into all the world." If you could somehow document all the times the voice of God's Word has impacted you and changed you, you might discover that some of the worst of times were the best of times because it was then that the Word of the Lord changed your life in a powerful way.

The Lord has the right man

The Lord also had the right man for job. "This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" It was the Lord who raised up this voice to cry out to people. John was unusual, a phenom. He was born to parents who were way beyond the age of having children. The angel Gabriel told his father that he would be great in the sight of the Lord and blessed with the Holy Spirit even in the womb of his mother. The gospel of Luke tells us that John grew up and become strong in the spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. He was alone with sounds of the wind, the wild animals and the stars at night. He lived on what the desert had to offer for food, locusts and wild honey. No books to read. No games to play. No text messages to answer. No television to watch. It was the Lord who totally immersed this man in his Word and trained him to be the voice he had called him to be.

The Lord always raises up people to get bring the message of his Word to people who are in need. Romans 10 tells us, "How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." It isn't just famous preachers such as John the Baptist or Isaiah or Martin Luther or Billy Graham that the Lord raises up to speak his Word to other people. He uses ordinary people like you and me. He allows us to use our vocal chords to speak words including words that direct other people to Jesus as the hope and source of our salvation. Yesterday we once again had the opportunity to uses our voices to teach children at our Christmas for Kids. The little child who sings "Jesus loves me this I know" as his mom shops in the supermarket is also a powerful voice the Lord raises up to get his Word out to people. In our sermon next week we are going to hear Jesus say that even the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. We are privileged to bring people the message of who Jesus is, how he was born, how he died, and how he rose from the dead.

The Lord has the right message

John did not develop his own message for people to hear. He stuck to the message the Lord had

given to him to bring to the people. His basis message was this, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." The word "repent" means to change your mind. We came into this world believing things that were bad for us were actually good for us. From the time you were a little child you believed with all your heart that being selfish and self centered was more important than showing kindness and love to other people. Ingrained in us from birth is the concept that we can be blessed by God in this life and for all eternity by certain things we do to please him. Repenting means replacing these human ideas about religion with what God has to offer in his Word.

To illustrate how repentance means I recall how my father changed his life style after open heart surgery. The arteries bringing blood to his heart were clogged with cholesterol because of a diet that involved lots of unhealthy fats. After the surgery my parents ate only chicken and fish, more fruits and vegetables. 25 years after the surgery doctors were amazed at how clear the arteries were that brought blood to the heart. Like bad eating habits, we want to get rid of the sin that is hurting us, hurting other people, and dooming us to eternal death and punishment. We want to put our hope in Jesus and what he has done to rescue us. This is what it means to repent.

John says, "Repent for the kingdom of God is near." When God comes to you in his Word he offers you the opportunity of a lifetime. He offers the privilege of being part of his kingdom. That means being under his unfailing love as his dear child.. When you look at the manger in Bethlehem and see the baby Jesus lying on the straw in swaddling clothes, you see your hope of being part of this glorious kingdom of God's love. Your King Jesus offers you treasures unlike anything this world has to offer. He offers his love which he earned for you because you could never make yourself worthy of this love on your own. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Religious people came to John the Baptist with no desire for repentance and no interest in the kingdom of God. John showed them what we might call "tough love." He said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think that you can stay to yourselves 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of tree, and every tree that does produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." He calls them vipers, and vipers they were. They were injecting people with the poisonous venom of false teaching. They taught that you can whitewash and cover up and hide your sin from a holy and perfect God by following man made rules and religions. They were proud of who they were, descendants of Abraham. John told that if God wanted to he could raise up children from the stones in the desert. He told them the axe is already chopping down the trees because they are bearing fruit that is despised by God.

John wanted these people to look at their lives and join the others in confessing their sins. A famous theologian once said, "Take away the aroused conscience and you might just as well turn the churches into dancing halls." The same thing is true for Christmas. Take away the aroused conscience and people will no longer see a need for Jesus to save them. If we no longer look at ourselves honestly and take God's judgment seriously then we will see no need for Jesus. Christmas will have no real meaning and value for us. Do you have a minute for some tough love? I would like to have you think about how you blame your husband or wife for your own faults or weakness. I would have you think about the evil thoughts towards other people or what about the sinful and immoral thoughts that you cultivate in your life. I want to talk to you about that smoldering anger, jealousy and hard feelings that don't go away. I want to have you think about how much time you spend watching television and how little time alone with God's Word and in prayer. It is time to stop making excuses. It is time to stop covering up our sin. It is time to come out in the open and confess as the people who did who came to John the Baptist. It is time to look at Jesus.

Oh, how John loved to talk about Jesus. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." It was John who pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Martin Luther had these words about putting our hope in this Lamb of God. "There are only two places for sin: either it resides with you, weighing you down; or it lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. If it is loaded on your back you are lost; but if it rests on Christ, you are free and saved. The time is now. The voice of John is calling to us. "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." Amen.