



Proclaimed in Baptism

January 3, 2010

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

MATTHEW 3

PRINTED TEXT:

MATTHEW 3:1-6, 11-17

*A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.”*

—Matthew 3:17

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

MATTHEW 3:1-6, 11-17 (NIV)

3¹In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea²and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."³This 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.' " ⁴John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

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. ¹²His 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." ¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. ¹⁶As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

INTRODUCTION**A. ANTICIPATION**

As I write this lesson, my wife and I are waiting with great anticipation for a phone call from our daughter informing us of the birth of our first grandchild. For several months we have been looking forward to this blessed event. Gifts have been purchased, a room has been prepared, and plans have been made. Now all we can do is wait.

Waiting is not something we human beings do well. We want results now! The expectation of instant gratification is a curse of our culture. But in the midst of our wanting things to happen *now*, how much do we anticipate God's ultimate fulfillment of his purpose of redemption?

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

Between the days of Malachi and those of John the Baptist, the nation of Israel had not heard the voice of a prophet of God—that's over 400 years! During those years of silence, some may have begun to feel that God had abandoned or forgotten his people. But the truth about God is that he is always at work, whether we recognize it or not. During those 400 years God had been working out his plan of the ages. That plan involved providing the ultimate answer for the problem of sin.

Our lesson today reveals the end of God's period of silence as a new prophet broke onto the scene. John the Baptist had come to announce that the one promised was close at hand. John thus served as the bridge from the anticipation of the Messiah to his actual appearance.

I. FORERUNNER COMES (MATTHEW 3:1-6)**A. IDENTITY, MESSAGE, LIFESTYLE (vv. 1-4)****1-4. In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea**

The phrase *in those days* may sound a bit vague to us. Since Jesus begins his ministry at "about thirty years old" (Luke 3:23), we can compute this point in time to be about AD 26.

Matthew's account doesn't give us any background information on *John the Baptist*. We have to go to Luke 1 for that information. There we learn that Jesus and John the Baptist are relatives. The designation *the Baptist* identifies something about John's role as being one who baptizes. That designation also helps us distinguish him from the apostle John.

The phrase *preaching in the Desert of Judea* gives us another clue about how God likes to work. God did not choose the palace of a king for the birth of his Son, but an

environment for livestock instead. Likewise, God does not choose to introduce his Son's ministry in the temple courts in Jerusalem, but rather through a spokesman in the uninhabited area of the countryside.

2.... and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

John's message of repentance is pointed. In a general sense, to *repent* is to change one's mind about something; in the sense of the gospel, to repent is to turn from sin. This repentance is to bring about a change in behavior based on the change of mind. It constitutes an about-face or U-turn in one's life. Repentance is based on an awareness of guilt and conviction of the conscience.

John's message of repentance is in anticipation of the imminent arrival of *the kingdom of heaven*. Mark and Luke speak of it as "the kingdom of God." Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, is thought to use the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in deference to that audience's sensitivities.

(There are 32 references to “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew, but none in the other Gospels.) A kingdom normally is thought of as the area (realm) in which a sovereign rules. However, God’s kingdom is not so much a place as it is people, thus its spiritual nature.

The ancient Jews have been anticipating the inbreaking of this kingdom. What catches many by surprise, however, is that repentance is a prerequisite for entrance. Many undoubtedly think that their admission into the kingdom of Heaven is assured by birthright. After all, they are Israelites! But as verse 9 (not in today’s text) makes clear, biological descent from Abraham isn’t the main issue. Repentance is.

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.’ ”*

The truthfulness of the work of John is validated in fulfillment of prophecy. *Isaiah* made his prediction some 700 years prior to John’s arrival. The prophecy at issue here is *Isaiah* 40:3.

A king in the ancient world has people who go ahead of him to herald his coming. John is in this role. His announcement of the coming of the Messiah is spoken of as one declaring and imploring through a strong *voice*. It signifies that what is being said is being said with passion.

Not only is the coming of a king heralded, but also *the way* is prepared. Rough roads are smoothed out so nothing will impede the arrival of a king. King Jesus comes to establish a spiritual kingdom and reign in the lives of people. Thus the preparation that is needed for his arrival is a spiritual preparation. It is a preparation of heart and mind. Thus the call for repentance.

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.*

The strange dress of this preacher of repentance is similar to that of Old Testament prophets (*Zechariah* 13:4). Specifically, John follows in the austere dress style of *Elijah* (*2 Kings* 1:7, 8). Clothing made of *camel’s hair* is in sharp contrast with the soft robes and vestments worn by royalty. The *leather belt* about his *waist* is an article of clothing that is identifiable with the working class. Such a belt is used to fasten the clothing about the waist so the worker can labor unimpeded. It is not a linen cord, but rather a rough, strong belt.

Also startling is John’s diet. The locust is a permissible food under Jewish dietary law (*Leviticus* 11:22). The mention of *locusts* alongside *wild honey* may not signify two things eaten separately, but perhaps refers to boiled or baked locust that is prepared in the honey. In any case, the diet is not the delectable food of the day. Rather, it is the diet of one living off the land. The lifestyle and message of John and other prophets stand in stark contrast to that of the cultured religious leaders.

B. SCOPE, CONFESSION, BAPTISM (vv. 5, 6)

5, 6. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John’s preaching works! Those who hear him are convicted. They repent, acknowledging *their sins*. That John teaches that baptism is to accompany repentance is seen in *Matthew* 3:11 (below) and *Luke* 3:3.

John’s Jewish audience is familiar with the connection between physical water and spiritual cleansing (see *Ezekiel* 36:25–27; compare *Hebrews* 10:22). Later, Jesus will chastise the learned *Nicodemus* for not understanding the connection between being “born of water and the Spirit” (*John* 3:5, 10).

Baptism is associated with the idea of a change in state from *unclean* to *clean*. Thus baptism is appropriate for non-Jews who convert to Judaism at the time, since Gentiles are considered to be unclean by Jews. Acts 13:26 seems to refer to these converts as “God-fearing Gentiles” in contrast with those who biologically are “children of Abraham.” Gentiles become spiritually clean in the Jewish proselyte baptism. This imagery carries over into the church age with Christian baptism (Acts 2:38; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21). Baptism is a washing (1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22).

II. FORERUNNER PREDICTS (MATTHEW 3:11, 12)

A. WHO IS COMING (vv. 11a, b)

11a. “I baptize you with water for repentance.

The call of John is for the people to repent, or turn from their sins. Those who do so then demonstrate their repentance by submitting to *water* baptism. This is no secret repentance, but rather is a full disclosure of repentance in a public act. The fact that the baptisms take place in the Jordan River is about as public as you can get!

11b. “But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.

John’s baptism is preparatory in light of the one who is coming after John: Jesus. Think of the great prophets of the Old Testament such as Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah. John is called greater than all of these (Matthew 11:11). But when John looks at himself in relation to Jesus, he knows of his own insignificance. It is the lowest of servants whose job it is *to carry* his master’s *sandals*. John does not consider himself even worthy enough to do this. He feels lower than the lowest in relation to Jesus.

So it still is that those who do great works for the Lord are, in the end, but lowly

servants (Luke 17:10). This attitude of humility is what makes one a useful servant for God.

B. WHAT HE WILL DO (vv. 11c, 12)

11c, 12. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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.”

Disagreement abounds as to what *with the Holy Spirit and with fire* means here. Some scholars say it speaks of two baptisms for two different groups. Under this theory, the water baptism is received by those who accept Christ; this constitutes a baptism unto life. The other baptism is a baptism of destruction in fire; this constitutes a baptism unto death in the final judgment. That, so the theory goes, is the idea of *burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire*. Thus what is signified by the *wheat* and *chaff* here are thought to be parallel to the wheat and weeds in Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43.

Another proposal is that the fiery baptism of the Holy Spirit happens when a person accepting Christ is baptized in water. This means that it is in water baptism that the Holy Spirit is received. The fire aspect symbolizes being purged from sin (chaff) at that time. Advocates of this theory point out that Ephesians 4:5 speaks of there being “one baptism,” not two. Thus the singular act of baptism is thought to be like a door that naturally has two sides: the physical (water) side and the fiery (spiritual) side.

The baptism that characterizes the Christian age is different from John’s baptism. Although it is still water baptism (see Acts 2:38a; 8:36; 10:47), an added element will be the receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38b; 11:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). John recognizes in his preaching that not only is he less than the Messiah, but also that his baptism is only preparatory to that of Christ (see Acts 19:1–6).

III. FORERUNNER SURPASSED (MATTHEW 3:13-17)

A. BAPTISM BY JOHN (vv. 13-15)

13-15a. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan

For *Jesus* to come from Nazareth in *Galilee* to the *Jordan* River means a trip of some 70 miles. To go to such an effort indicates the importance Jesus places on what is about to happen.

13b, 14.... to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus has come to be *baptized*, but why? John's baptism is a baptism of repentance (Acts 19:4), but Jesus has nothing from which he needs to repent (Hebrews 4:15). John himself recognizes a problem, thus his question, "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*"

15. Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

If *Jesus* does not need a baptism of repentance unto forgiveness because he is sinless, then why does he insist that John baptize him? The foundational answer is that it is the right thing to do.

But we should probe further. In what way will this baptism *fulfill all righteousness*? There have been many proposals. The best approach will take into account both the repentance and end-times ("kingdom of Heaven is at hand") aspects of John's baptism. Regarding the first of these two, Jesus' baptism signifies his identification with those who are confessing their sins. Humility is expressed in this act. Part of the very reason for the incarnation is that God comes to earth in human form and faces the same issues that humans face. Jesus is the suffering servant in this regard (Isaiah 42:1).

The baptism of Jesus also marks a dividing line in God's plan for the ages. Jesus is just about to begin his public

ministry, thus the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. That may be the importance of the word *now*. Jesus himself is the dividing line between those who are saved and those who are lost, between those who are in the kingdom and those who are not. Jesus thus fulfills all righteousness in coming to suffer on behalf of those who need to repent as he pushes into being the next stage of God's plan for our redemption.

B. CONFIRMATION BY GOD (vv. 16, 17)

16. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

The fact that Jesus comes *up out of the water* indicates that he has been immersed in the water. As he is coming up, *heaven* is *opened* in some sense. What this looks like we can't be sure. Is the throne of God in Heaven visible to Jesus and John? Or is this more of a picturesque way of saying that God's approval is being granted? Some Christians today use terminology symbolically to speak of God's sending down a blessing. Ezekiel 1:1 and Revelation 4:1 also speak of the opening of Heaven.

The Spirit makes his arrival at this event. Isaiah 11:2 states that *the Spirit of God* is to rest on his anointed or chosen one. The image *like a dove* is clarified by Luke 3:22, which says that "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove." We see the Son of God and the Spirit of God working together at other times in Scripture. One occasion is at creation itself. In Genesis 1:2 we see the Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters. We know that Jesus was part of this creation process because John 1:1-3 indicates that nothing was made except by the Word; the Word is identified as Jesus in John 1:14. See also Colossians 1:16.

God used a dove in the Old Testament as a sign of his deliverance. In Genesis 8:6-11 a dove brought an olive leaf to the ark when

the earth was ready to be inhabited again after the flood. The word picture of the dove at the baptism of Jesus thus offers a certain parallel to the idea of God providing new life to a world that was filled with corruption in Noah's day.

17. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

In addition to the Spirit of God comes the *voice* of God. This is one of those times in Scripture when we see all three persons of the Godhead coming together at one time. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let *us* make man in our image." The use of the word *us* implies plurality even as God is one (Galatians 3:20).

We also see the interplay of the three divine persons in the nativity story. God speaks to Mary (by means of an angel) to tell her that she will be with child by the Holy Spirit. Of course, this child is the third member of the Godhead, Jesus. Now at the inauguration of the ministry of Jesus we see the three working together again.

God's approval and affirmation of both the person and future work of his Son is

confirmed in this event. God's announcement that *this is my Son, whom I love* does not mean that it is the baptism of Jesus that somehow confers sonship on him. He was already the Son. This spoken declaration is for John's benefit and ours as well. Some students hold that God may very well be addressing the angels (and perhaps even Satan) in this declaration also.

Jesus is unique as God's Son. Yet each person who surrenders to God and is baptized into Christ is also a child of God (Galatians 3:26, 27). In that case, we can think of God saying to us, "This is my son (or daughter) in whom I am well pleased." Those who follow Jesus truly do receive the approval and recognition of God. Even so, no one is "Son" in the same sense as Jesus.

Some students link the words of God here with Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. These passages speak of the chosen one of God and his role of service and sacrifice. This great day and this event mark the beginning of a life that is filled with this service and sacrifice. Jesus did it for us.

CONCLUSION

This is the time of year that many resolve to make changes. It may be changing an unhealthy diet, initiating an exercise routine, or correcting improper sleep habits. Some resolve to get their financial house in order or shake an addiction. The best resolution anyone can make is to heed the call of John the Baptist and repent. Perhaps there is a sin habit that is controlling your life. Determine now to turn from it. Even if you've been a Christian for a long time, you can resolve anew to honor Jesus as Messiah (1 John 1:9).

COMPARING FORERUNNERS

President Nixon's visit to the communist People's Republic of China in February 1972 was truly historic. Up until the 1970s, few major nations recognized the legitimacy of that country's government. Nixon's visit had considerable political peril for the United States, since it risked straining relations with the Soviet Union, Japan, and Nationalist China.

Behind the scenes, the visit required massive preparation. In July 1971, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger held secret talks with China. Kissinger continued his secret preparations with

visits in October 1971 and February 1972 to continue laying the groundwork for Nixon's visit. The details to be worked out were staggering.

The similarities and differences between the works of Kissinger and John the Baptist as forerunners are intriguing. As Secretary of State, Kissinger was one of the most powerful men in the U.S. John, for his part, had no trappings of earthly power. As "advance men," both were charged with setting the agenda of someone to follow. The agenda that Kissinger set had many topics and nuances. The one that John set was focused on one idea: people needed to repent. Kissinger worked in secret; John worked publicly. By calling attention to the sin that separates us from God, John prepared an audience to hear the gospel of the kingdom of God. Are you ready to hear it?

THE RIGHT THING TO DO

Everett Hines was training with his crew in a bomber in 1942 before being sent to war. The plane crashed, and Hines—a white man—was knocked unconscious. Although America was segregated at that time, Abe Watson—a black man—rushed into the burning plane and rescued Hines. Both men were seriously burned. During their recovery, they met briefly and then were sent off to war separately.

Fifty years later, Hines was visiting a friend in the hospital. Nurses wheeled past him a man who had suffered a heart attack. It was Abe Watson.

Watson was dying and asked Hines to do him a favor. He had an unmarried daughter who had three small sons. Watson asked Hines to "watch out for them." Hines said, "How could I say no?" So Hines brought the family into his own home and became the grandfather Watson could not be. When interviewed in 2004 at age 85, Hines had a house full of teenagers. He said, "If it hadn't been for them, I'd be gone by now." Some people seem to know instinctively what it means to do the right thing. Hines's decision brought comfort, community, and new purpose into his life.

Jesus asked John a favor: "Would you baptize me?" John couldn't understand why, but he soon realized that the right thing to do was to honor Jesus' request. Jesus asks many things of us in the pages of the New Testament, including baptism. Have we done the right thing?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. Should Christians dress in a distinctive way, or should our manner of dress "blend in" with our culture? Why?

2. In what ways can John the Baptist still serve as a model for drawing attention to Jesus and away from ourselves?

3. What are some ways you have seen the Holy Spirit active in your life or the lives of others? What can we do to better understand and appreciate the work of the Spirit?

4. Is it presumptuous to think that God might say of us “This is my son (or daughter), in whom I am well pleased”? Why, or why not?

5. Why do so many of us fail to keep our New Year’s resolutions? If we resolve to heed John’s call to repentance, how can we carry through with that decision?

LET’S TALK IT OVER

1. Should Christians dress in a distinctive way, or should our manner of dress “blend in” with our culture? Why?

In the Old Testament, God established certain rules for dress and grooming. Along with dietary, ethical, and religious laws, these rules were to mark the Jewish people as holy—that is, distinctive, set apart for a special work of service to God (Leviticus 19:19, 27). God’s ultimate purpose, however, was that the Gentiles would come to know Him and be incorporated into His people, thus erasing the Jew/Gentile distinction.

In this light, New Testament instructions on dress are concerned with modesty and cultural appropriateness, not with the creation of a “Christian society” that is identified by distinctive clothing (1 Corinthians 11:3–16; 1 Timothy 2:9, 10). The Christian’s visible distinctives are to come from lifestyle more than clothing (1 Peter 3:3).

As a general principle we can heed Paul’s example of observing the appropriate customs of the people group he was with, whether Jewish or Gentile. We do this not out of fear of people’s opinions, but from a desire that nothing hinder the advance of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

2. In what ways can John the Baptist still serve as a model for drawing attention to Jesus and away from ourselves?

Consider three characteristics of John’s life. First, John encouraged people who initially were attracted to him to follow Jesus instead (John 1:35–39; 3:22–30). Second, John responded with humility rather than pride when called for a special work of service (Matthew 3:13, 14). Third, at a time of doubt when he was in prison, John continued to turn to Jesus for answers (Matthew 11:2, 3).

Christian parents follow this example when they bless their children to pursue ministry callings that take them far from home. Also, we think of those servants in the church who cheerfully agree to change their area of service when that will enable others to have opportunities to serve.

3. What are some ways you have seen the Holy Spirit active in your life or the lives of others? What can we do to better understand and appreciate the work of the Spirit?

Jesus promised the Spirit as the one to bring conviction of sin, knowledge of righteousness, and judgment of evil (John 16:7–11). The Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:26), imparts spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4–31), and helps us bear fruit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:25) and not grieving the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) with our attitudes and behavior are the general principles for allowing the Spirit to work in our lives to the greatest effect.

4. Is it presumptuous to think that God might say of us “This is my son (or daughter), in whom I am well pleased”? Why, or why not?

Some Christians struggle with an image of God as an angry taskmaster, the ultimate unpleaseable parent. If we are trying to achieve righteousness with a perfect God through our own faltering good works, then we have a hopeless task before us (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:9–20). We will indeed have trouble envisioning God being pleased with us while we’re in that mode of thinking.

According to Scripture, however, there is no condemnation for the Christian (Romans 8:1–4). Christ’s blood has paid our debt, allowing us to be adopted into God’s family and setting us free to have peace and fellowship with Him (Romans 5:1, 2; Hebrews 9:11–14; 1 John 3:1, 2). Because we are “in Christ,” the acceptance God expressed for His own Son can, in a sense, flow over to us as well (again, Galatians 3:26, 27).

5. Why do so many of us fail to keep our New Year’s resolutions? If we resolve to heed John’s call to repentance, how can we carry through with that decision?

We definitely are fickle beings! Today’s firm resolve melts into tomorrow’s compromise under the pressures of daily life. Efforts we undertake only through human strength and wisdom are subject to failure (Zechariah 4:6).

PRAYER

Father, give us a conscience to repent and a will to do so. Remind us that repentance is not a one-time thing but an all-the-time thing. As we repent, may you be able to say of each of us, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” . We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.