

### ***A Man Sent from God***

In the name of him who is the Light of the World, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading begins by giving us John the Baptizer's impressive credentials. I mean, why should we believe him? Why should anyone take him seriously – this wild eyed, roughly attired, bug eating, desert dwelling, firebrand of a preacher whose fiery words burn the ears of his hearers hotter than the sun scorched wind? The answer's right there: he's a man sent from God. And it's important to note that the word there translated "sent" is a form of the Greek verb from which we derive the word *apostle*. It means more than sent in the sense of a letter sent through the mail. No, this means sent as an official agent with the authority to speak for the sender and to transact business in his name. Thus when John speaks, his words are the Lord's. And when John baptizes people for the forgiveness of their sins, it's the Lord's work that's being done by his hands.

By introducing John to us as he does, the Evangelist is telling us in no uncertain terms that the Baptizer stands in that long line of biblical prophets: men like Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others, all of whom were sent from God to declare his word. Each of them, in their day, was sent to bear witness to the Light that God had promised to send into the wasteland of this dark and sinful world: the saving Light of his Son, Jesus Christ. They did so, speaking in prophetic terms, often using allegories and types, and performing actions that prefigured the work of salvation and restoration that Christ would later do in a much fuller sense. And that throughout history God sent official spokesmen to convey his truth and perform his work demonstrates his untiring grace and mercy. He didn't leave his people to their own dark imaginations and sinful devices to guess what was on his mind and what he was up to. Left to themselves, humans create all kinds of crazy mythologies, philosophies, and theories to explain the universe we live in – all of them false and none of them offering any real hope for mankind. Therefore through his true prophets the Lord kept the promise alive through the ages – the promise first made to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin and dragged all creation down with them under the curse – the promise to send the Seed of the woman who would redeem that which had been lost. And over the long centuries through the prophets the Lord embellished the details, explaining more and more of his gracious plan to save fallen man, and revealing more of his true Light: the Savior coming into the world.

That's what all the prophets did until John. To *him* fell the special task of not simply filling in details and pointing ahead to what the Lord would do at some unspecified time in the future; but rather to pull back the veil in the here and now and reveal the Savior already in the world. But first he had to get the drum beat rolling. First he had to draw a crowd. First he had to call people together and prepare them for what they were about to see.

So it is that in last week's Gospel we heard how John began his ministry, not, as might be expected, in Jerusalem: the center stage of the Lord's worship and the religious capital of the world; but in the desert wasteland east of there a good day or two's journey – a journey that involved leaving the comparatively cool, breezy, and well watered Judean highlands and descending some 4000 feet to the geographically lowest real estate on earth. It was not an easy trip to make. And it wasn't at all comfortable out there in the desert with the dry heat and the gritty sand blowing in your face and accumulating in every nook and cranny on your body. But that was rather the point: to get people out of their comfort zones, to disrupt the usual patterns of their lives, to get them away from the distractions that stand in the way and prevent

them from seeing what's really important. And all of this not just in a physical sense, but even more importantly in a spiritual way. John's task was to prepare people for the revelation of the Savior by confronting them with their sins and their need to be saved from them.

The problem is that we tend to think of our sins as if they weren't problems. We get comfortable with them. It's, "Yes, I sin. I break God's commandments all the time. So what? Everybody does. Cant' help it. That's the way life is. And hey, I'm not as bad as some people I could tell you about. Besides, near as I can tell, I'm not really hurting anybody. Doesn't matter anyway. I'm pretty sure that God loves me for who and what I am. So what's the big deal?"

We all fall into the trap of thinking this way, and it's so utterly clueless and wrong. It demonstrates no understanding at all for the way things really are: how God abhors even the slightest infraction of his holy law, how he thoroughly condemns each and every violation, and how much we really do hurt each other and ourselves by our evil thoughts, words, and actions. John was sent from God to tell like it is. He prepared his hearers for the revelation of the Savior by making them feel the heat of God's wrath against them on account of their sins and by warning them that unless they repent, they'd be feeling that wrath forever in the flames of hell.

And again, we heard last week how many people responded. Throngs of folks from Jerusalem and all around Judea made that hard trip down to the desert. They heard John's warnings and trembled at God's judgments. And confessing their sins with repentant hearts, they were baptized by John in the Jordan River – which itself was an act of humiliation. The Jews of that day didn't baptize their own. It was a cleansing rite they created for Gentiles who were converted to the true faith and wanted to be identified with God's people. And you know how little Jews thought of Gentiles. To them, they were worse than unclean dogs. So, what a Jew who was baptized by John was saying is "I've not been living as one of God's chosen. I'm no better than a filthy, idol worshipping pagan. I want a new start, a new beginning. Wash me, O Lord; take my sins away. Make me one of your own again."

This is the way many people responded, and those who did were truly prepared when John pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. There's your Savior. Trust in him." But not everyone responded this way. As we heard in today's lesson, John was making some other people uncomfortable in an entirely different way. Interestingly enough, it was those who were the most religious and outwardly righteous in their behavior: the priests, the Levites, the Pharisees: people who knew God's Word very well and who tried scrupulously to order their lives according to it. They saw John as a threat. They were envious of his rising popularity. They feared what his ministry might mean to them. And they chaffed at his insistence that all people need to examine themselves, confess their sins, and repent. Sure, they could see it for the common people. But us? We who are righteous and good? Just who does this John fellow think he is?

So, they send a delegation to find out. And this is significant: they are sent by men, men who falsely imagine themselves to be far better than they were, men who really didn't think they needed the Savior from sin whom the baptizer came to reveal. John, on the other hand, was sent by God. His credentials far outweigh theirs. But they don't see that. All they see is an impertinent upstart who's trying to rain on their parade. They put their question to him, "Who are you?"

It was a time in Jewish history when Messianic expectations were high. In view of this, and of John's powerful message and his widespread popularity, it's likely that some people were wondering aloud if John might be the One they were waiting for. John appears to have heard

such rumors, so he moves first to put them to rest emphatically stating, "I am not the Christ." This, no doubt, was a relief to the delegation sent from Jerusalem. There had been other self-proclaimed messianic pretenders who appeared briefly on the scene, who stirred up small followings, and then attempted to lead ill-conceived revolts against the Roman occupation. Such episodes never ended well. There'd be a crack down from Rome, the would-be Messiahs and some of their followers would be killed, and the rest were scattered. The delegation of priests and Levites would have been happy to hear that John was not one of these guys.

Still, they imagine that John must think that he's somebody pretty important. They too are teachers of God's Word, and it is, after all, how they think of themselves. They naturally suppose that John thinks that way too. So they run down a list of other important persons that they – mostly from their misreading of the Scriptures – expect to show up in advance of the Christ's coming. "Are you Elijah?" – the one prophet who didn't die, but was carried to heaven in a whirlwind. John replies, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet? – the one Moses foretold would appear one day who was greater than himself. Moses was actually referring to the Christ; but these guys don't know it. They were confused. They thought of the prophet as being somebody other than the Christ. Either way, John denies it.

"Well, then, who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us." John's answer to them is telling. Instead of claiming to be someone important in and of himself, he says that he is nothing but a voice: the one foretold by Isaiah the prophet calling out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord". With these words John is telling them, "My ministry isn't about me. My ministry, my message, is about the One who sent me. It's about the Christ who is about to be revealed. I'm merely a spokesman.

But they don't get it. It's not the way they think. To them everything is about looking good, being admired, having people look up to you thinking that you're someone holy and good. John has all garnered all kinds of fame and respect by his teaching – the very stuff they crave. And he's acting like it's not important to him. He keeps insisting that he himself is nothing. It confounds them. So they ask if indeed you are nothing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, why are you baptizing? In other words, why are you doing what you do if not to exalt yourself?

Again, John's answer is telling. "All I'm doing is baptizing – putting water on people's heads. That's nothing to get excited about. But among you stands One whom you do not know, he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." To fully understand what John is saying requires some unpacking. First, you have to know that in that culture, feet and everything about them were considered especially disgusting. It's hard for us to get it; but even today, in many Mideast countries, the worst insult in the world is to throw your sandal at somebody because, after all, it's been in contact with your stinky, sweaty foot. So when John says that he's not worthy to untie the strap of the sandal of the One who comes after him, he's indicating that the person of whom he speaks is higher above him than the heavens are above the earth. "I'm not fit to perform for him even the lowest of lowly tasks." He means the Christ, of course; the One to whom his ministry points. It's his way of saying, "You think I'm important? That I'm somebody special? No. I'm orders of magnitude lower than the One I've come to proclaim. But he also says that you do not know him. He stands here among you; but you don't know who he is. My mission is to point him out; but you cannot know him until first you know your need for him. If you refuse to admit your sin and repent, you cannot and will not ever know him.

Through John's ministry, many did come to know and trust the Savior. In fact, several of the men Jesus chose as his first disciples had first been the disciples of John. As we know, John did not live to see the conclusion of the ministry of Jesus – how he bore the sins of the world upon the cross, how he suffered and paid the penalty for all mankind, and how he rose again on the third day to declare his victory for us over death. No, John died trusting these promises of God, and in that hope he was saved. But his ministry went on. Through the men Jesus appointed as his Apostles, the work of calling sinners to repentance and then pointing them to the Savior and his redemptive work on their behalf multiplied by a factor of twelve – and then many times beyond that. It continues even today through the men God calls to serve the church of Jesus Christ in the office of the holy ministry. In this sense, they too are men sent from God – provided, of course, that they do what John did: namely to proclaim not themselves nor the work of Christians, but God's wrath against sin and the salvation he has provided in Jesus Christ.

But this is the problem with so many nominally Christian churches in our day (and it happens in all denominations, including our own). Some pastors succumb to the temptation to exalt themselves in the eyes of their hearers. They want to gain followers for themselves, people who admire them for their eloquence, their inspirational talks, their personal charisma, their funny stories, and their supposedly great life styles. If they're good at it, they become the leaders of their own personality cults. And their messages are filled with tips and advice about how you can become more like me. Or, and this is even a more common problem, instead of exalting themselves, many preachers aim their messages toward improving the lives of their hearers. It's not "You're a lost sinner who needs a Savior"; but "You're someone who's not living up to your true potential. Here, let me show you what the Bible says about how you can improve yourself." This sort of preaching is received especially well because it allows people to exalt themselves. In assemblies where either of these things is happening, Christ stands among them, but they don't know who he is.

Listen: a religious teacher can talk all day about himself or you, and the Bible, the wisdom contained therein, what God commands, who did this or that in the biblical storyline, and many other things, and never mention your sin, your need to repent, and your need for the forgiveness and life that Jesus alone can give you. And that's your first line of defense against false teachers. You should be listening for the message of John the Baptizer. If that's not what you're hearing – be it from me or anyone else – you need to find another preacher. But if that is what you're hearing, then you can be reasonably confident that your preacher is a man sent to you by God to help prepare in you the way of the Lord. May the Lord in his mercy continue to send to his church such voices in the wilderness. And may he give his people the discernment to reject those who come with a different message. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***