

The Forerunner of the King – John the Baptist
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
February 28, 2021

Diaspora L – The Church Scattered, Fiftieth Sunday

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Purpose: After 400 years of silence, the prophet John the Baptist challenged the people to “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!” We are called to repent as well. Produce righteous fruit by the power of the Holy Spirit before the ax is laid to the tree and the winnowing fan is brought to bear on your life.

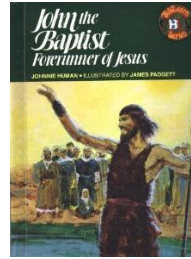
Every great move of God has a forerunner. A forerunner is someone or something that comes ahead and prepares for the important event behind it. In days gone by, before an important person came to town, a crier or herald would go ahead and proclaim the coming of someone important. This crier was not the important one, rather, the one they were announcing was who was important.

Many newspapers call themselves the “Herald” as a way of announcing news for coming events.



Over the past few weeks, we have been examining Jesus as the King of the Jews. We have seen our King born in Bethlehem, exiled in Egypt, and today we will be looking at John the Baptist as the forerunner of the King. Matthew presents John the Baptist as one that came before Jesus.

As you read through the Old Testament, you will find over and over various people called to be the prophet of God to their generation. Two of the divisions in the Old Testament are dedicated to the Major Prophets and Minor Prophets.

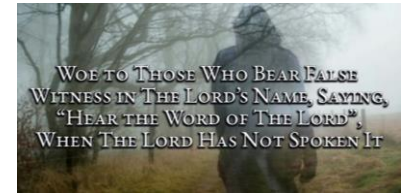


People like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are classified as the Major Prophets. Others like Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are classified as Minor Prophets. This is an arbitrary designation because the only thing that separates them is the size of their book. Each of these Old Testament books represents a message to God's chosen people, no matter the size or length of the message. Some prophets that were considered even greater did not have a book dedicated to them – they would be Elijah and Elisha.

Almost without exception, these individuals stood out as having a “Word from the Lord.” There have been many self-proclaimed people who claim to know the mind of God for a certain situation, but these “prophets” have proven themselves wrong time and time again.

I was meeting with a few pastors two weeks ago and one made the comment that there was a “Pandemic of Prophets” rising up. Even today, there are many claiming supernatural knowledge and understanding. Many of them are teaching things that are not in scripture and their prophecies do not come to pass.

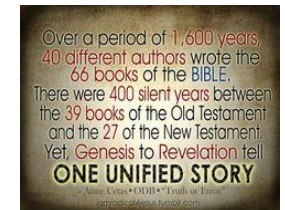
Do you know the Biblical test for a prophet? They are never wrong. Whatever they say or prophecy always comes to pass. (Deut. 18:22) We need to be careful to test everything said – even the things I preach on – with the written word of God.



Ever since Israel became a nation, there has been one speaking to the nation and calling them back to God. Often, many of the prophet's words were rejected by the leaders of Israel. So sure were they in their calling, they persisted and proclaimed the “Word of the Lord.”

- Jeremiah prophesied destruction and was rejected by everyone.
- Jonah preached to Nineveh even though he did not want to.
- Nathan pronounced judgment on David when he sinned with Bathsheba.
- Samuel blessed David as King when Saul rejected God's word.

Once the prophet Malachi completed his ministry, the prophetic voice in Israel became silent. For 400 years Israel stood silently waiting for a “Word from the Lord.”



The people began to wonder what had happened to the Kingdom. One world empire succeeded another: first Babylon and then Persia. Alexander the Great ended Persian domination of Israel around 333 B.C. The Greeks spread their language and culture throughout the region.

Israel enjoyed self rule beginning in 167 B.C. when they revolted against Greece. This period fostered religious freedom and growth of their faith. In 63 B.C. Roman General Pompey conquered Jerusalem and began to tax the people and limit their freedoms. A few weeks ago, I mentioned Herod the Great began to rule the region around 40 B.C. and ruled until his death in 4 B.C. His son Herod Antipater was the one Jesus stood trial before. (Luke 23:6-12)



When John the Baptist came upon the scene, God's voice came as an unexpected, but welcomed voice. This strange looking man, dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locust and honey, came out onto the public stage and began to proclaim a word from God.

The Old Testament prophecy concerning a forerunner is found in Isaiah 40:3 and is quoted in all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;
The glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together,
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken”.* (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Maybe you remember this man called John was born to Zacharias and Elizabeth. They were way up in years and even though they tried, they had no children. The year Zacharias served as the High Priest in Jerusalem; Elizabeth conceived John. (Luke 1) So shocked was Zacharias at this news, that for nine months he was unable to speak. Once John was born, he was able to speak again and he gave him the name John as instructed by the angel Gabriel.



Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke (1:17) was quoting the last verse in the Old Testament by saying John “*would go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,”* and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*” (*Mal. 4:5-6)

I am sure through the years; John grew up in and around the temple. He was from the tribe of Levi and they were responsible for keeping the operations in and around the temple going. When John was older, it would have been expected of him to take on his father's role and serve there in the Temple. I am sure John saw what Jesus saw – an outward faith, but not an inward change. He saw corruption in the buying and selling of sacrificial animals in the temple area. He saw the religious conflict between the Pharisees and Sadducees and their corruption. Because he was the cousin of Jesus, I am sure they had contact over the years. He probably heard the stories of how John leapt in his mother's womb when Mary came to Elizabeth's home while Mary was pregnant with Jesus.

For some reason John decided to move out into the desert to distance himself from the toxic political and religious environment in Jerusalem. Some have suggested John may have been a part of the Qumran community located beside the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1948. There could have been many other groups seeking to grow closer to God by disengaging themselves from modern city life and living a simpler, self denied lifestyle, by living in the desert.

I remember visiting Qumran years ago when in Israel. I was able to see the old foundations of buildings, various caves surrounding the area where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and look over the waters of the Dead Sea. It is a dry, desolate place. I cannot imagine a more isolated place to get away from Jerusalem.



I remember hearing someone speculated that this community at Qumran was looking and waiting for the return of the Lord. They were waiting, anticipating, trying to live as simply as possible and waiting for a move of God. The people of Israel had waited 400 years and not one word was given to Israel.

John steps out of his previous role as son of the high priest and began preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Apparently, he had one sermon and it was repeated over and over. *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

That reminds me of a new minister that came to a church and preached a stirring message of salvation and repentance. The church responded warmly but was not moved to do anything about what they heard.

The next week he preached the same sermon. The people were concerned, but no one said anything to the new minister – maybe he got his sermon papers mixed up and they overlooked the fact that he repeated last week’s sermon. The third week, he preached the same message. Afterwards, the Chairman of the Deacons spoke to him about preaching the same message three weeks in a row.

The minister said, “Well, until this church is willing to repent and receive Christ as Savior, then there is no need for me to move on to another topic.”

John the Baptist, I am sure used more than that one sentence to prick the hearts of the people in Judea. But the theme of that sermon series was *“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”*



I have a family member that lives near Charlotte and they are a member of Elevate Church. It is one of those modern large churches. When I asked about the church, they said their preacher wore blue jeans and t-shirts and he had a pierced ear. That may seem cool to many today. I could go along with the blue jeans but I will pass on the earring.



In John’s day, he must have been quite an attraction. The scripture says he clothed himself with camel’s hair and accented the wardrobe with a leather belt. If that is not odd enough, he only ate wild honey and locusts. Even today, in and around this region, locusts are eaten and some consider them Kosher.

John's message must have struck a chord among the people because everyone came out to hear what he had to say. He drew crowds from Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all of the small towns and villages around the Jordan River. His message touched their hearts, convicted them of their sinfulness and they went down into the Jordan waters to be baptized.



They experienced what John was calling them to do. They repented. It implies that they had a radical change of mind. The ones that responded to John's message took a hard look at their past and resolved not to live that way any more. To honestly examine our lives, actions, thoughts, words, and deeds is not an easy task. To back away from ourselves and give serious consideration and admit who we really are – a sinner – a scoundrel – a liar – a thief – is painful.

We are experts at diverting who we are and projecting our problems on others. We blame the government, our neighbor, our parents, our employer, our spouse – anyone but ourselves. It could be our sins so consume us, so blind us, that we never can see or hear the message of John – *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*

But what was John saying when he said, *“the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”* He was not the one to whom he was referring. He was speaking of one that was to come. That one to come was Jesus Christ. In Mark, Jesus echoed John's message when He said, *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel (Good News).”*

While John was saying *“Repent,”* turn from your sins, Jesus was adding, *“Believe in the Gospel (Good News).”* While John was saying *“turn around,”* Jesus was saying, *“believe in Me.”* (Mark 1:15)

What a celebration in the desert! People were repenting, lives were being changed, and there was hopeful expectation in and around the area for the coming Messiah.

I had the opportunity to be baptized in the Jordan River when I was visiting Israel in 2008. I returned again in 2013 and was able to baptize my friend Bo Gamble. The place



where Jesus was baptized is probably located on the Jordanian side of the Jordan River and located much further down stream than the place I was baptized. Today, much of the Jordan River is diverted for agricultural purposes. What is trickling down to the Dead Sea is very polluted and very small. When I was there, it was almost like a small creek. For the past 30 years, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea have been dropping steadily. I was greatly surprised to read this week, that both are experiencing high water marks due to recent rain.

With all of the success John was experiencing, you would think the religious leaders would be pleased with the positive changes in the people. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to see what was happening, John called them out. He called them a brood of vipers. John didn't mince words. Prophets rarely do. He mocked them and said, *“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*

The last verse in Malachi warned that the Lord would come and “*strike the earth with a curse.*” Maybe they took John seriously to see if he was as one “*Crying in the Wilderness.*”

John warned them, and he warns us today, “*Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.*” (Matt. 3:8) As Christians, we are called to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23)



That fruit includes **love**, **joy**, and **peace**.

Are you extending love to your neighbor and coworker?

Are you overflowing with joy – no matter the circumstances?

Do you have a sense of peace about you? If you don't, maybe you don't have that Spirit within you.

We are called to **suffer long**.

If we have the fruit of God's Spirit, we will demonstrate kindness in every area of our life. I am prone to sarcasm when I should be gracious and kind toward others.

We are to be **good**, **faithful**, and **gentle** in our interactions with others – family, friends, along with the average person we meet daily.

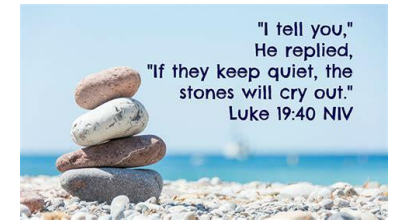
We are to demonstrate **self-control** in our lives – that includes our relationships, our finances, our tongue, our behavior, and our thought life.



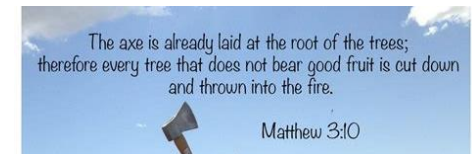
As Christians we are called to live, inwardly and outwardly, the life of faith.

Apparently, the religious leaders in John's day had failed miserably. They may have had an outward religion – like white washed tombs – but inwardly, they were dead. They had relied upon their heritage and their family lineage to be made righteous in God's eyes. John knew their thoughts and responded to their logic before they could even say anything. He knew they relied on Abraham as their father. But John understood what a true child of Abraham looked like. It did not matter about blood line – what mattered was the heart.

If God so chose, He could cause stones to rise up as children of Abraham. That statement reminds me of the day Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The religious leaders wanted Jesus to stop people from praising Him. He said, “*I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.*” If you and I, which are made in the image of God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, cannot or will not praise Him, and give Him the glory due His name, then God can raise up another – even stones – to sing praises unto Him.



John warned, the ax was at the root of the trees, ready to bring them down. The time for judgment was almost at hand. The time of judging was near.



Would they accept the King or reject Him? Would they believe on the gospel or reject it? Would they turn from their false, fake, outward religion or would they embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Some of the trees would bear fruit, and others would be cut down. And it would not be long before it all happened.

Jesus' ministry lasted three years. After that He was crucified upon a hill outside the city, buried in Joseph's tomb, and rose from the dead three days later. Because of the religious ruler's rejection of Jesus, thirty years later, in 70 A.D., the Roman army came and completely destroyed the temple. All the stones were torn down and many were carted off. The axe was at the trees, and many were cut down.

To this very day, the Temple there in Jerusalem has not been rebuilt. There has not been a system of sacrifices and offerings reinstated. God judged His own people for rejecting the one and only Son of God that came into the world, not to condemn the world, but to call them to repentance and provide them salvation. There is only one name under heaven whereby you can be saved – that name is Jesus. That is the one that John the Baptist knew was coming.

John knew that the baptism he was calling people to was unto repentance. John was not the important person – it was Jesus. John's message was not given to build up the kingdom of John.



He did not build great buildings to edify himself. He called people to change, repent and to be ready for the one coming behind him.

His job was to level the mountains – raise up the valleys – make the crooked paths straight. He was the one that went ahead.

So many people today in Christian ministry have attempted to build kingdoms for themselves. They write books, go on television and radio, to build up their church, or their ministry or their own kingdom. It should not be about the messenger – it should be about Jesus. Who is getting all the attention in a ministry – is it the minister or is it the Lord?

John understood that when Jesus came, His emphasis would not be on water baptism, but rather on the Spiritual baptism. John could not save – only Jesus saves. John said that when He comes, He would baptize with the Spirit and fire. When Pentecost came, that Spirit fell and the fire rested upon each one as they spoke in the language of the various people gathered there in Jerusalem.

The day of salvation is today. We do not know when our last day will be. John says "*Repent.*" Jesus says, "*Repent and Believe in the Gospel.*" There is coming a judgment day for every one.

John described it as the day the winnowing fan will be used on everyone.

During John's day, people would go into the field and gather the wheat in bundles and bring them to the thrashing floor. The wheat would include the good grains of wheat at

the top and useless chafe around the wheat and stems. Today our farmers use a combine to separate the wheat from the chafe. In John's day the wheat needed to be trampled on to break the wheat away from the stalk. Then the winnowing fan would work its way through the pile of mixed wheat and chafe and toss the chafe into the air. The wind would catch the chafe away and only the wheat would fall to the ground. After time, only the wheat would be left there on the floor. It would then be gathered and saved; the chafe would be swept up and burned.



I believe the Lord is winnowing His church. Who will be left standing after the Lord tests and tries us?

John was saying that everyone would be gathered up – either unto salvation because their fruits were good – or unto condemnation and eternal judgment because they were fruitless. We cannot bear the fruit of the Spirit on our own. It only comes as we allow the Holy Spirit to live in us. As we turn from our sinfulness and receive, by grace, God's forgiveness. Then the Spirit and His fruit can be evidenced in our life.

John's message is for us today as well.

Repent – for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Be careful your faith is genuine, inside and out, and not simply religiously curious as the Pharisees and Sadducees were. You cannot rely on your family's Christian heritage to save you.

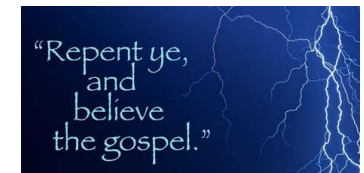
Take notice: the axe is close to the trees and the ones that will be cut down are the ones that are not fruitful. Become a fruit inspector of your own life. Don't waste time looking at other people's lives – you take care of your own life first.



John called people to identify their baptism with repentance. But John also acknowledged the inward Spirit was more important. That inward Spirit was the power of God to bring about change in a sinner's life – not the water but the Spirit.

One of the last things I see in this passage this morning is the reality of reward and punishment. God is preparing to reward those that love Him, and is willing that none perish. But there will come a day, when those unbelievers will be judged and put into the unquenchable fire. The justice of God demands that sin be punished. The mercy of God provides a way of salvation to all who will repent and receive Jesus as their Savior.

May you hear John's message – *Repent* – and examine your heart and life before the winnowing fork is applied to your life.



LET US PRAY

