

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 3:1-20

"Someone Greater"

All the Gospels agree that Jesus' public ministry began at the time John the Baptist was nearing the end of his. The date is around 28AD by our calendar, and Israel is now divided into several provinces ruled by non-Jews: two sons of Herod the Great, Antipas and Philip, rule the northern regions including Galilee and the coast, and Judea is now under direct Roman rule through procurators/prefects like Pontius Pilate (after the disastrous rule of the third Herod son, Archelaus, had moved the Jewish leaders to petition the Emperor Tiberius to get rid of him).

Israel's political and religious climate was a mess: the Romans and the Idumean Herods were violent and corrupt, the Annas family that held the High Priesthood for almost 50 years were Roman collaborators. Religious groups like the Pharisees and the Essenes wanted to purify the nation, while Jewish rebel bands were fomenting revolt against the occupation. It's no wonder the people were looking out for a charismatic leader, a savior, a "strong man" in the mold of Judas Maccabaeus, to take charge.

1) *John the Prophet*

The bigger picture was of more than 400 years of foreign rule by Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, Syrians, Romans; a deep sense that Israel's Exile was still not over, a longing for the word and

power of God to be felt in the land again. So out of the desert comes John, looking and sounding like an Old Testament prophet, saying *"the word of the Lord has come to him."*

John confronts every level of Jewish society with denunciations and demands. *"Repent... be baptized... show by your lives that you are the people of God who observe Torah!"* Ordinary people in great numbers are attracted to him, and come for baptism to show their repentance; soldiers and tax-collectors seek direction for their lives. Even the Temple establishment comes down from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to check him out; he greets these "most religious" people with *"snakes, who warned you to flee the wrath to come?"* To the ruling Herods, John offers Antipas condemnation for his incestuous marriage to his brother Philip's ex-wife – which of course lands John in prison! And to the many Jews who thought that their problems would be solved if only "the foreigners" could be purged from Israel, John says that being "a child of Abraham" is no longer enough – "the people of God" will no longer be defined by ethnicity or heritage!

John is not an easy man to be around – he is a polarizing figure who confronts and divides. The peasants love him, the establishment hates him. You can see a pattern emerging already that Luke, our author, wants his readers to know is going to characterize this entire Gospel and his book

of Acts. When God acts, people react in very different ways: some rejoice, some repent, some criticize, some rebel. The messenger is never “popular,” and cannot aim to be, because the word of God burning inside him or her often opposes the status quo; it typically brings comfort to the people who live in the pit, and anger to the people who live at the top.

2) *One More Powerful*

But to see John the Baptist only as a kind of “folk hero” who denounces the status quo and pays the price, is to be in danger of missing the main point about John – the point John himself insisted on. He said he was nothing compared to “*The One Who Was To Come.*” John says “There is someone coming soon who will make all I do and say look like nothing... He is someone far greater than I am... I am not even qualified to be his servant and attend to his dirty feet and his sandals. Who he is and what he does will be of a totally different order. I am not the Messiah you long for, he is!”

Says John, Jesus, the true “strong man” is able to do what I can never do. I can immerse you in the waters of the Jordan to symbolize the washing away of your sins. He can immerse you in the Holy Spirit which will *truly* wash away your sins! Everything I do is a *symbol* and a *word*, while everything he does and says is the real thing. *He* forgives sins, he makes people whole, he gives new life, he reconciles people to God. I talk about it, he *does* it! Compared to knowing Jesus, all you have seen and heard from me amounts to nothing – at best, a preparation.

John’s role is to plow up the hard ground, to disturb the status quo, to open people’s ears enough that they may be able to hear the voice of the Lord, the voice of God, in the voice of Jesus. John cannot forgive people, Jesus can. John cannot heal anyone, Jesus

can. John cannot save anyone, Jesus can. John’s gift is to point people to *Jesus*. That is John’s calling. So it always is – the messenger is like an ambassador whose job is to introduce people to the King, the only Lord and Savior. It doesn’t matter what people think of the messenger; what matters is that they meet the King he represents.

3) *The Holy Spirit and Fire*

Jesus is the real and expected *Messiah* of Israel, the *Christ* to the Greek-speakers. And he will “*baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” What does that mean? Here is the clue: Jesus will “*winnow the chaff from the grain;*” he will gather the grain into his barn, but the chaff will blow away in the wind and the straw - like the dead wood of Abraham’s tree - will be thrown into the fire. Jesus will divide people: some will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, some will not.

The “*good news*” of the Gospel is that the powerful Lord is the gracious Son of God, who out of love and compassion will give himself to redeem and deliver a group of people who will become *the new “people of God.”* They will not all be Jews, and not all Jews will be among them. But Isaiah’s words will come true in Jesus: “*all mankind will see God’s salvation.*” Jesus is the Savior of the World, not just the Messiah of Israel.

What would it mean to be “*baptized with the Holy Spirit*”? 1st century baptism meant immersion in water, or if not, inundation by pouring jugs of water over the person’s head. And because Jesus himself insisted on being baptized by John, and often spoke of his coming death as “his baptism,” the Christians quickly picked up on the symbolism and began to describe baptism as “dying and being raised again,” like Jesus. Being immersed in water is like a drowning, and you are “raised” again, spluttering for breath, to what seems like new life!

Baptism is an action done to a willing person by the one who baptizes; you don't baptize yourself! So Jesus will inundate, immerse, overwhelm, those who are willing, in and with the Holy Spirit. This *truly cleanses* the person from their sin - as water baptism *symbolizes* cleansing from sin. Who will be baptized? The example of John's baptism tells us it will be those who are ready to repent - to turn away from sin, and the status quo, towards God and his Son Jesus.

4) *Jesus the Savior*

So John the Baptist confronts us still with the crucial question: do we know "the greater one" who stands among us, and are we willing to bow before him and receive his baptism? Because no words or actions of human messengers - John the Baptist or anyone else - mean anything compared to knowing the presence of the living Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior. Are we willing to meet him? Are we willing to allow him to drown us in the Holy Spirit? That means we will have to lay down our arms, confess our sins, admit our need, be cast down, which we will find humbling at the least!

And if we grasp the imagery of baptism representing burial with Christ and being raised to new life, do we know the power of that in our lives? There is an ancient story about baptism that has always impressed me: in the so-called "Dark Ages," a Germanic tribe was converted to Christianity. When they were baptized, the fighting men held their "sword hands" out of the water. They understood that immersion meant death to the old ways, but were not fully ready for that. They were warriors, after all! I have sometimes wondered what the modern equivalent would be. Do we, metaphorically, hold our wallets or our pocket books out of the water when we are baptized? Our jobs? Our sports? Which parts of life do we *not*

really want redeemed, but would rather keep under our own control (or so we imagine)?

If Jesus is the Savior of the *world*, then he cares about redeeming all parts of our lives and all kinds of people. Claiming that we are "descendants of Abraham" won't do - nor will having ticket-stubs from the Mayflower! Being "more moral than some other people we know" won't do. Being willing to yield parts of our lives to Christ, but not others, probably won't do either!

The image of "baptism in/with the Holy Spirit" should remind us that we are dealing with someone far greater than we are, and that he is sorting the grain from the chaff and storing the good seed in his barn. John the Baptist, "the last of the Old Testament Prophets," would want us to realize that finally the King has come, the Strong Man is in the house, and we should not be worrying about what we think of John, but whether we will allow the Lord to baptize us with his Spirit!

Let us pray...