

MATTHEW 3

JOHN, THE OPENING ACT

If you have ever been to a concert, especially a rock concert, then you have seen/ heard or possibly endured the opening act. The opening act is usually an up and coming band, hoping to eventually be the main attraction. This is a way for them to learn their chops while providing something of an introduction for the main attraction. While they have yet to arrive as the big name that attracts the majority of the crowd, they are working their way towards that goal.

Today, we will read of the opening act, the herald who was to introduce and set the scene for the main attraction, Jesus Christ. We know this opener as John the Baptist or baptizer. Last week I likened life to a play or drama that will determine where we spend eternity. In a drama, there are many players. Last week we dealt with Herod, the Magi and Jesus. This week we deal with John. His position/ part is critical. He understood his part and “played” it well. We can learn a great deal from this man.

The scene opens:

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

*Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.”*

4 Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

The text begins with the phrase, “In those days...” The immediate question is, “What were those days?” The answer to that question is in part, the atmosphere of expectation we talked about last week. Many people felt that something or someone was on the immediate horizon – and they would be correct. The other portion of the answer is, “the days preceding the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

We read that John came from the wilderness of Judea. He was the son of a priest and came from a very pious family. He and Jesus were actually cousins, as we are told in the Gospel of Luke.

But why did he come from the wilderness of the desert and why did he minister in such a remote location? To the Israelite, the desert had a great deal of significance. It was through the desert that Israel wandered. It was seen as a place of solitude and a place where the poor lived, eking out a living at a subsistence level. It was seen as a place to get away from corruption and luxury. Thus, it was a place where those that sought to be closer to God went to live in isolation. In the OT it was seen as the abode of the prophets. And John stepped right into this context.

John wore a camel hair suit. This was the usual type of garment for the poor and those living at the edge of Jewish life. For the prophet or the ascetic, it was worn as a statement against those that had gotten caught up in the trappings of the average, ordinary, sectarian lifestyle. Now before we all take vows of poverty, we have to realize that John's approach is the opposite of Jesus, who wore the garb of a rabbi. John preached from without the establishment, whereas Jesus worked within and without the system. Jesus went to the synagogue and taught. He dealt with the Pharisees and Sadducees in their own environment. They had different methods and slightly different missions. John came as a prophet, a man of the desert heralding one who was greater than he. The first century Jew would have expected one dressed and speaking as John to be a prophet. Thus, he plays his part and fulfills the prophecy of one **coming as or one like** Elijah. This makes him credible to the people. This was they had looking for to end the dearth of prophecy that had been prophesied as coming after the ministry of Malachi the prophet.

John came from the wilderness and conducted his ministry, for the most part in this remote place. His message drew the people and he then drew the people away from the corrupt religious system to a place of isolation in order that he could preach without much interference from the religious establishment. In modern parlance we would say, "the setting had an ambience."

John's message was fairly simple, but it was powerful. "Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" John was quoting Isa. 40:3. The B portion of that verse, "make His paths straight," was a somewhat common phrase that was used when anyone of royalty would be coming into town. It was at this point that the roads would be repaired in preparation of the royal motorcade. John's use of it here speaks of his role in the plan of God. He was the opening act. He was clearing the path for Jesus' ministry and message.

"Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand," was the main theme of his message though it had a two pronged approach.

The problem with the word, “repent” in English is that it is often one sided. In the Hebrew context it means that there has to be a change in action. In the Greek form, it simply means a changing of the mind. John actually combines the two. He preaches that one must change their mind, but that must as of necessity lead to a change of action. Modern, sanitized forms of Christianity can often muddy the waters as to the meaning. But John was clear on this. There should be a definite changing of the Jewish mind, (as that was his audience) but there had to be more than a mental acknowledgement of this, there had to be a change in attitude and action also.

The Jewish people, as a whole, had, during the inter-testamental period divided into various sects with each one grasping a certain thread of prophecy. Each sect held to this thread so tenaciously that tension had become an everyday reality. John sought to break the barriers and bring the people to a basic universal truth. The kingdom was near and therefore people must change their ways in order to be a part of it.

Kingdom of Heaven vs. Kingdom of God: what is the difference?

- To the Jew, using the name of God was taboo therefore “kingdom of Heaven” was often used in reference to the kingdom.
- Though many dispensationalists, (I being one) have tried to differentiate between the two, they are used synonymously and often interchangeably in the Gospels.
- In context it literally means, “an irruption of God’s power into history in a new and dramatic way.”
- This ‘irruption’ was near, or in the Gr. perfect tense, “has drawn near.”
- A new sheriff was on His way, therefore there had to be change. The present way of doing business would not suffice.

John’s message was one of repentance, but there had to be something to show for it. You had to have some skin in the game. Therefore, John baptized those that received his message in the Jordan River.

- Baptism was not a new phenomenon. It had been used of adult proselytes from pagan religions for a long time.
- The Pharisees practiced it also, but usually required perpetual baptisms as a constant sign of cleansing.
- John was one and done.
- Full immersion
- John was so clear that the water in and of itself was just an outward sign that Josephus wrote of it as being a symbol that the soul had ALREADY been cleansed and was a public statement as to the acceptance of John’s message.
(Josephus; Antiquities 18.5.2)

- There was no misunderstanding in John's day as to the place of baptism. It was not a means of salvation as some Pentecostals teach today. It was what it was. An outward sign of the acceptance of the message to repent, confessing their sins or status as a sinner and a public statement that actions and attitudes would change accordingly.

John had gathered quite a following and because of that, the religious authorities had to look into what he was doing.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Please note that the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming **TO** John's baptism, not **FOR** John's baptism. John knew the overall mindset of these two groups. And attacks their errant mindset with a few allusions to the OT. He refers to them as a brood of vipers, which had a great deal of meaning to the first century Jew. Just refer back to Genesis 3 and the story of the serpents in the wilderness as Israel made its way to the Promised Land. The serpent was seen as subtle and cunning. By asking, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John tells them, in a sense that the message is not for them. What does this mean? Is the Gospel not for everyone? In one sense it is, in another, it isn't. It is for those willing to repent and accept it. As a whole, these groups weren't willing to hear. They didn't feel as though they had the need. John alludes to this in the next line.

The religious establishment, as well as many other Jewish people felt as if they could fall back on a loophole of sorts. They were the descendants of Abraham. Therefore they had an "automatic in" to the kingdom of Heaven. John says, "Not so!" God was able to make even the very rocks cry out to Him and could, even would do so if necessary. **"God had no grandchildren!"** None of us can ride the coattails of his/ her parents into the kingdom. This is a personal thing. The Pharisees and Sadducees would have to repent, turn, change their minds and be baptized as a sign of this in order to enter into the kingdom. There was one rule for all; no exceptions.

Even now, he said, the axe was being laid to the root of the tree. This meant that judgment was imminent. Not necessarily the "judgment day" but a personal judgment, which coincided with a personal decision.

This is the second prong of John's approach. Essentially he was saying, **"Turn or burn!"** Though this message isn't popular today, it is the message John taught and what is more, Jesus repeats it word for word in some of His greatest sermons. There had to be evidence of a change or there was no real change. If there was no change to be seen then judgment ensued.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John now concludes his "fire sermon" with more of the same. He has come to baptize with water as a sign of one's turning, but the one for whom he is only the opening act would come with a different baptism(s). Both believers and non-believers will receive a baptism but they are different. For the believer there is a baptism, immersion (indwelling) into the Holy Spirit. For the unbeliever there is baptism into fire.

For those that believe these are one and the same, meaning the baptism of the Holy Spirit is one of fire, please see the context. The fire speaks of judgment. John says that Jesus has His winnowing fork, (explain) and will separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat goes into the barn (kingdom) while the chaff is burnt with an unquenchable fire. The context is everything and it is plain.

There are only two options: Repent or face judgment.

John's life, ministry and message are relevant for us today in a couple of ways. First of all, John knew his place – his part in the ministry and kingdom of God. Do we? It has been my experience that most people suffering from depression or a general lack of motivation do so because they have no part in God's plan or at the very least, they choose not to play it. Some want no part at all or others want a different role than the one for which they have been cast. This, in a nutshell is rebellion.

In civilized society, everyone has a role to play from the gardener, the garbage man to the doctor, lawyer and even president. Not everyone is a rocket scientist. We are not all capable of the same achievements. But, we are capable of playing the roles to which God assigns us. In this and only this will we experience fulfillment and long-term joy. Not everyone who auditions for the leading role in a movie can be the lead. And without the supporting cast there can be no play. It takes a village to make the world go around.

John accepted his part as a supporting role. He played it, lived it to the max. He played it so well that he was eventually killed because of it.

Now, in order to even have a part, regardless of the role we must first see ourselves as sinners. The Law makes it clear that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. If you don't believe this, let me ask you a few questions.

- The lack of a concept of sin in modern society.
- Sin has become cultural and subjective.
- The Way of the Master.

Now, if we see that we don't measure up to God's standard, we have the option of repenting or facing the judgment. You do have a choice.

John states that we have to accept the imperative to repent. We have to turn around, change our way of thinking. We have to accept our role in the kingdom. If we truly repent, then this change in thinking will result in a changed life. If there is no change then there is no new life/ eternal life.

James 1:22 – 25

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 2:14 – 24

Faith Without Works Is Dead

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

James merely reiterates what John is saying and what Jesus says in the next few chapters. Put your spiritual money where your mouth is. If you say, you know you are a sinner and in need of a savior, then admit it. Turn; change your way of thinking to match that of God. Seek His face and not His hand. IF you say you believe then there should be visible proof.

And finally, you should be baptized. Not for salvation, but because of it.

John had gathered a large following. Keep in mind that there was no social media back then. There were no billboards or TV commercials. John's following came from word of mouth. And those that professed to have partaken/ accepted John's message went and told their friends and family. The crowd gathered because people spread the word by mouth. And guess what, it didn't, it couldn't stop there. If the people, after repenting and being baptized, weren't seen to be credible by those around them, then John's ministry would have died in the desert. In a world of modern convenience, it is hard to conceive of people traveling through the desert. It was a rugged journey, especially for more cultured city folk. But they went because they saw it was worth it. Those that brought the message to them were credible. They lived out what they said! And because of it the word went forth and John's "Church in the Wilderness" grew!

Do you want to grow? Do you want our church to grow? Then live what you have been taught! Go with excitement into your workplace and neighborhood and tell people about Jesus! Show them your faith by your works! Let them know how your life has changed! Plug in!

If you lack enthusiasm and direction, it isn't because God hasn't spoken to you. It isn't for lack of opportunity. It is because in some form or fashion you have sided with those in John's day that refused to respond to the message in a sincere way.

Are you ready to enter the kingdom and play a part?

We hold auditions for parts in the God's kingdom on a daily basis.