



There are few things as classic as a church play. Whether at Christmas, Easter, or any other time, the church play is a spiritual rite of passage. I was in my share of church plays when I was a kid, especially at Christmas, but I was not, unfortunately, much of an actor, so I didn't get the good parts. I have long believed there is one character always left out of church plays that should be included, and that is John the Baptist. I think it's very difficult to really capture the essence of John the Baptist, however. Even in my favorite Biblical movie – *Jesus of Nazareth* – the filmmakers didn't quite capture him (admittedly, there are some obvious problems with that movie, such as casting Robert Powell, a blue-eyed British actor, to play Jesus. Powell was great in the movie, but it takes a bit to overlook a Jesus with blue eyes and a British accent). Michael York (another British actor, and a very fine one) was cast to play John the Baptist in *Jesus of Nazareth*, and he did fine, but I never thought he was quite wild enough. From what we know of John from the gospels he was quite a fascinating character.

John the Baptist is, in my opinion, one of the most colorful and interesting characters in the Bible. Here is how Matthew describes him – *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* (Matthew 3:4). If I wore clothes of camel's hair and had a diet of locusts and wild honey I would probably be quite a character as well. I have actually seen someone eat a locust before, and I'm telling you, that is not something you want to make a staple of your diet, and anyone who does must be quite the colorful character.

Today we complete the series of messages *The Journey to Advent*, with a message based upon a portion of the story of John the Baptist. Now I am aware that, technically, John the Baptist comes *after* the first Advent by about 30 years, but I chose this story because it makes a logical conclusion to last week's message about the silence of God. The arrival of John the Baptist breaks the 400-year silence of God, which had begun at the end of the prophet Malachi's ministry. John, as the gospels tell us, was the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. After the long silence from God, with John's arrival, God was no longer silent. And with John the Baptist, God certainly spoke very loud and very clear.

So follow along with me, please as I read today's Scripture text.

Luke 3:2-18 –

2 the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'

5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God's salvation.'"

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

John the Baptist is mentioned in all four of the gospels, which is a bit unusual for the gospel stories. Sometimes, only one gospel will feature a story; sometimes two. With other stories it is what we call the *synoptic* gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that will share a story. It is somewhat rare when all four gospels include a story, and when this happens it is a sign of that story's great importance. What was important about John? Besides being the one who came to prepare the way for Jesus, John was a prophet – a very important prophet – and as a prophet he did several things –

1. He told the truth.

John was a prophet in the classic sense, in that he was someone who told the truth even when it was very difficult to hear and even when it caused him great difficulty to do so. Prophets are often viewed as those who foretell the future, which was not the primary function of a prophet's ministry. Prophets, when speaking of the future, warned about the consequences of what would happen if a present course of action continued. In the Old Testament, for instance, the prophets often warned of the consequences of ill-informed political alliances or poor decisions regarding military campaigns. Their "future telling" was a warning to discontinue a present course of harmful action, but even in speaking about the future a prophet's words were couched in honesty.

Generally speaking, we don't like to hear the truth, and we find it difficult to speak the truth. How many of us love to have someone walk up to us and say, *I need to be honest with you about something?* Doesn't that make your stomach start to turn? Or who wants to be in the position of having to confront someone with a difficult truth? Honesty, to be honest, is very difficult.

John could be very blunt in his honesty, but even in his bluntness he still attracted crowds of people. Verse 7 tells us that *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* John was not directing his words at the usual suspects – the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees – but to all the people coming to hear him. Does that seem to

you like a good way to draw a crowd? It doesn't to me. Over the years, I've had some people ask me to be more harsh in my messages. *Step on our toes; get on us Dave*, they will say. I don't understand that, actually. I have long wondered why it is that some people want that kind of preaching; the kind that is condemning and harsh, and here is what I have come to think about those requests. I believe people find that to be a cathartic experience. Some people feel if they are spoken to harshly and condemned as being "bad" people they have received some kind of punishment they deserve and can then go about their lives.

But John wasn't speaking truth just to step on people's toes or to be harsh; John was speaking truths that needed to be heard, and people respond to that kind of honesty. Every historical moment has truths that need to be heard, and John was certainly speaking truth to his historical moment. As I was thinking about John this week, I was wondering, do we have any prophets today? Do we have any truth tellers? It was a struggle for me to come up with names of people I would consider a modern day prophet. (After my message, I did have some suggestions, some of whom I agreed had prophetic messages, but I'm still not sure who I would say is a modern day prophet. I consider there to be prophetic voices in our culture, and one of them is Wendell Berry. I believe that Wendell is an important voice of truth today, but for two reasons I did not mention him as a prophet of today. First, Wendell bristles at being considered a prophet, so I did not want to place upon him a mantle that he resists. Second, though Wendell is widely known, he is still unknown in many circles in our society, and I was trying to think of people who meet two qualifications – they are known by almost all Americans and they are also widely acknowledged as filling an important, prophetic role. Upon further reflection, I realized that such a person may not exist today because we are so fragmented as a society that we could never come to any broad acknowledgement about a person who would widely be considered as having a prophetic voice. But perhaps a true prophetic voice can only come from the margins, which means they will never be fully acknowledged by many people. In that respect, Wendell Berry certainly does fulfill the role of prophet, as does Thomas Merton, whose name was suggested to me. It may also be that a prophetic voice does not always come from an individual. The voice of the media certainly offers, at times, a prophetic voice. It may also be movements that offer a prophetic voice, such as the movement that is now sweeping through our country calling out sexual harassment).

2. *John reminded us that we must do what is right.*

While most of us don't claim to be the moral equivalent of Mother Teresa, we will agree that we're *not bad people*. *We try to be nice and treat other with decency*. That's good. There is much to commend for being nice to your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. It's a good thing to do nice things to others.

But what John is talking about is something much deeper, because he is not defining us by what we avoid. John says that it's not enough to simply avoid things such as being mean to someone or treating someone un-neighborly; John is saying we are also to be people of action. Having just celebrated Thanksgiving, it is important to note that we are very much influenced by the tradition of Puritanism, which was defined by avoiding particular sins, such as drinking and dancing. The Puritans emphasized personal piety, and to a point there is nothing wrong with that, but we cannot be defined simply by what we avoid. The Pharisees, for instance, were the classic examples of this, as they met all the requirements of what to avoid, but Jesus often found them greatly deficient in their spirituality. Jesus, in fact, was often critical of the Pharisees and others who did all the right things when it came to personal piety – they followed all the dietary laws, and they avoided all the things they were supposed to avoid, but to Jesus, that simply wasn't enough. As much as the Pharisees were examples of great piety, listen to a few of the things Jesus had to say to them –

13 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*

14 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely.

15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.'

17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.'

19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

20 Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

21 And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.

22 And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Matthew 23:13-28.

Wow. Now that's some truth-telling!

Here is the lesson we are to learn – it's great to avoid certain things and to live a pious lifestyle, but at some point that is simply not enough. At some point, it's not enough to define our righteousness by what we *don't* do; our righteousness must be defined by what we *do*. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this –

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 *“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”*
37 *The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”* Luke 10:25-37.

The priest and Levite, pillars of righteousness, did nothing to help the man who was beaten, robbed, and left by the roadside. Their righteousness, measured by what they avoided, did nothing to help the injured man. To Jesus, it was more important that they *did* something, rather than simply *avoiding* certain things, in order to be righteous.

In the book of James we find a similar message –

14 *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?*

15 *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.*

16 *If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?*

17 *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

18 *But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.*

19 *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

20 *You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?*

21 *Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?*

22 *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*

23 *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.*

24 *You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.* James 2:14-24

3. *John was not afraid to get political.*

I was somewhat amazed by how many news articles I read last week about how to avoid arguing about politics over Thanksgiving dinner. It’s a sad commentary on the state of our culture when we can’t discuss our ideas and beliefs with our own families. My family had Thanksgiving dinner at the home of one of my sisters, in West Virginia, and at one point I brought up a political topic about West Virginia politics but it died fairly quickly, and maybe that was a good thing. My mom says there were two subjects they weren’t allowed to talk about at the dinner table when she was growing up – politics and religion. Wherever you gathered for Thanksgiving, I hope you didn’t argue, but I can’t help but feel sad that we can’t talk about important subjects without so easily falling into contentiousness and arguments.

John was absolutely not afraid to talk about politics or to inject himself into politics. If anyone told him it was bad manners to talk about politics, he certainly didn’t listen. If he had listened, perhaps he wouldn’t have lost his head. Literally. John’s meddling in politics cost him his life. Herod famously had John decapitated because of John’s criticism that Herod had taken his brother’s wife into his house. Herod was not pleased with this critique, but Herodias – his brother’s wife – was particularly offended, and set a trap for Herod, forcing him into the execution by having her daughter dance on the condition that Herod grant her anything she would ask. Her request was for the head of John, an action that Herod had been reluctant to take because of John’s popularity, and because he liked to listen to John, in spite of the fact that John was critical of him (*because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him* – Mark 6:20). Herod did, however, grant the request to have John beheaded (*1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus,*

2 and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,

4 for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."

5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

6 On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much

7 that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted

10 and had John beheaded in the prison.

11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

12 John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. Matthew 14:1-12).

John says in verse 17 of this morning's text that *His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.* After 400 years of silence, God was again speaking. After 400 years of what seems to be absence, God is stepping into human history. And as God spoke and stepped into history, God was not very happy about the state of things, and this is why John was not afraid to step into politics – because politics controls so much of the human condition, if we don't speak to politics we will never do much to change the human condition. Even today, it's the same pattern of injustice and status-quo sanctioned suffering that continues to plague humanity, as it has from the beginning. Jesus was coming, John said, and he's going to do something about the mess that humanity has created.

God had something to say to those in power, as God always has. God continues to have something to say to those in power. We live in a world where so many people continue to struggle under oppression, where so many must struggle under inequality, and where so many must struggle with injustice. Freedom, equality, and justice are gifts of God to all people and it is necessary that we step forward and use our voices to proclaim that all people should be given these gifts from God.

We are in the midst of a very interesting and powerful historical moment. Many things are changing. Many things need to change. Many things must change. Will they change, or will the moment pass? Only time will tell, but it must be our hope and prayer that change does come. But it must also be our action as well, because the freedom and the other gifts of God will not come to the people who are lacking in them unless we speak up and become a prophetic voice for them.

John was the one who prepared the way for Jesus. When Jesus came, God's kingdom came to this world. It might seem as though we are still waiting for God's kingdom to come to fruition but it is here, it is taking root, and it is growing. We might not always see God's kingdom, but rest assured that it is present. God's kingdom is not just a future hope; it is a present reality. The world might not be what God wants, but one day it will. One day there will be peace for all. One day there will be equality for all. One day there will be justice for all. One day love will rule. One day. It might not be today, but the day is coming, and that is the truth!