

LIVING THE RELATIONSHIPS CHRIST CAME TO REDEEM
(1) JOHN THE BAPTIST: WHY RELATIONSHIPS CAN BEST BE DESCRIBED
AS DEPRAVITY MANAGEMENT

Luke 1:5-17; Mark 1:1-6

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(Loosely inspired by John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, Zondervan)

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PROLOGUE

Relationships can be problematic even at the best of times but they seem to be especially strained during the holidays. As I was thinking about this last summer I remembered a book by John Ortberg called, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. In it he discusses how we can overcome the problems that drive us apart and learn how to come together in the life-changing relationships God designed us for.

In preparation for this sermon series for Advent, I thought it would be insightful to pick some key Christmas story characters and then reflect on their lives using some of Ortberg's ideas. The characters are represented on the front of your worship programs by photographs of actors dressed as the biblical characters. In order you have: John the Baptist; Elizabeth his mother; Mary the mother of Jesus; Joseph, the husband of Mary and adopted father of Jesus; and Jesus himself. Today we consider John the Baptist and why relationships can best be described as depravity management.

SCRIPTURE

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. {6} Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. {7} But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. {8} Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, {9} he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. {10} Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. {11} Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. {12} When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. {13} But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. {14} You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, {15} for he will be great in the

sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. {16} He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. {17} With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:5-17 NRSV).

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. {2} As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; {3} the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" {4} John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. {5} And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. {6} Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:1-6 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

John the Baptist is part of the Christmas story but the reasons are not obvious. After all, it is hard for us to picture him in a nativity scene. And when was the last time you saw him on the front of a Christmas card? Poor John the Baptist, where does he fit?

The answer is found in the Old Testament prophets quoted by Luke and Mark. Isaiah and Malachi pointed to the promise of hope. God was going to send a messenger who would prepare the way for a righteous King who would come to save his people. The Isaiah image is a picture of the man whose job it was to go ahead of the king in order to level and smooth out the roadway for the royal party. Malachi is even more specific and tells us that this person will have the spirit and office of Elijah. Hundreds of years later, Mark would write in his Gospel, “And so John came.” With these four words he declared that the promise of God had come true in John.

1. PRETENDING TO BE NORMAL

John was not literally the reincarnation of Elijah but carried out an Elijah-like ministry before Christ began his ministry. Many regard Elijah as the grandest and most romantic figure of the Old Testament. But he was also the classic example of a Hebrew prophet.

Prophets like Elijah came around when God’s people started believing in the wrong things and were living their lives based on those wrong beliefs. John the Baptist represents the culmination of this prophetic ministry. Even though he is only mentioned in the New Testament, he is, in fact, the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets. His place in

the Christmas story is to remind us that we have believed in the wrong things and have been living our lives based on these wrong beliefs.

The truth is we respond to life in our fallen world in unhealthy and selfish ways. We pretend to be kinder and healthier and more spiritual than we are. We think of ourselves as normal and assume others should be as well. John Ortberg comments:

We are tempted to live under the illusion that somewhere out there are people who are normal. In the movie *As Good As It Gets*, Helen Hunt is wracked by ambivalence toward Jack Nicholson. He is kind and generous to her and her sick son, but he is also agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, and terminally offensive: If rudeness were measured in square miles, he'd be Texas. In desperation, Helen finally cries to her mother: "I just want a normal boyfriend." "Oh," her mother responds in empathy, "everybody wants one of those. There's no such thing, dear."

When we enter relationships with the illusion that people are normal, we resist the truth that they are not. We enter an endless attempt to fix them, control them, or pretend that they are what they're not. This is why so many of our relationships are not healthy and would be better described as depravity management. Ortberg observes:

From the time of Adam in the garden of Eden, sin and hiding have been inevitable as death and taxes. Some people are pretty good at hiding. But the weirdness is still there. Get close enough to anyone, and you will see it. Everybody's normal till you get to know them.

2. SEEING OURSELVES AS WE ARE

Thousands of people flocked to see John the Baptist in the desert. Why? To see some good-looking trend-setter? Hardly, John wore camel cloth and never cut his hair or beard. To hear a winsome speaker give uplifting messages? No, he had a habit of telling people they were like snakes that should be exterminated or that they were dead trees that should be chopped down and thrown into the fire. They came in spite of these things because John was a sign of hope. And the first step toward real hope is embracing the truth.

John helps us see ourselves as we really are. The fact is, we are not normal. No one is. Ortberg says:

We all want to look normal, to think of ourselves as normal, but the writers of Scripture insist that no one is "totally normal" – at least not as God defines normal. "All we like sheep have gone astray," they tell us. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

John prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ by baptizing people. The concept of water baptism was not new. Various groups used it as a symbol for spiritual cleansing. Even the Pharisees baptized people but they only baptized non-Jews (Gentiles) who converted to Judaism, never someone who was already a Jew. Yet John the Baptist was baptizing thousands of his fellow Jews. These people recognized that something needed to change. They knew it was not their bloodline that mattered to God but a clean heart that mattered to God. So they humbled themselves in this way in order to prepare for the coming of the One whom God would send to save them from their sins and give them new life.

3. PREPARE FOR WHAT WE ARE MEANT TO BE

John helped prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, whom we know to be Jesus of Nazareth. Basically, John's message is that if we want to have a new life with God we need to change the old one. This is a necessary change and one with eternal consequences.

I find it interesting that many people thought John was the Messiah and that many of these same people could not accept Jesus as the Messiah. John fit their expectations, you see. He was very weird and very religious. He had to be the Messiah. Jesus was just too normal to be the Messiah. He hung around with ordinary people. He ate and drank, laughed and cried – way too normal!

But God's plan is that we become like Jesus not John. John has his place, of course. He helps us to see the truth about ourselves. But being really weird and really religious is not God's intent. He wants us to be completely normal – like Jesus.

CONCLUSION

A friend of Ortberg's was ordering breakfast while on a trip in the South. He saw grits on the menu and being a Dutchman from Michigan he was not exactly clear on the nature of this item. So he asked the waitress, "What exactly is a grit?" Her response was classic. "Honey, they don't come by themselves."

Apparently grits do not exist in isolation. No grit is an island. You can't order just one grit. They are a package deal.

So too with humanity as God intended it. We are not meant to live in isolation. Dietrich Boenhoffer pointed out that seeking to live for one's self alone is futile and leads to despair. Or to put it in Ortberg's words: "We are all part of the grits. And honey, we don't come by ourselves."