

Matt 3:1-12

Who is John the Baptist? He was a servant of God and everything about him gave indication to that fact. His birth narrative (Luke 1), his lifestyle and message (Matt 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3), and, finally, his imprisonment and death (Matt 14, Mark 6 and Luke 3). Jesus called him the greatest to have been born among women. **Matt 11:11** “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” **ESV** Not to digress but notice the transformative power of faith in Jesus as indicated by Jesus’ words here. Who is John the Baptist? John was the fulfilment of prophecy (Isa 40:3, Malachi 4:5-6, Matt 17:12-13). Sisters and Brothers, John the Baptist is a prominent figure in scripture and one whose words are to be taken very seriously. So, I caution us from simply skipping over John the Baptist to Jesus, for the gospel starts with him. Having studied thoroughly his life/ministry as communicated in scripture I have four questions we will wrestle with this morning in view of this passage.

First question. What was the difference between John’s message/ and Jesus’ message? V1-3 “In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, ²“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” ³The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” Their message was identical up until what constituted true repentance and forgiveness by God. For John the evidence of true repentance was a change in behavior. For Jesus the result of repentance was belief in his gospel, first and foremost, which

assured one of forgiveness of sin and right relationship with God. Listen to me: a person can change his or her behavior apart from belief in the gospel. One can be repentant about one's behavior apart from belief in the gospel. One can do good things apart from belief in the gospel. But one cannot be reconciled to God apart from faith in Jesus. If you simply want to be a better version of yourself, you don't need Jesus. A mentor, a life coach, etc. will do. But if you want intimacy, if you desire life and right relationship with God, you must **repent and believe the gospel**. Remorse, confession, turning from one's sinful ways, being baptized, and carrying out good works are all a part of both John's and Jesus's message. But only the Gospel of Jesus offers us life with God, now and into eternity. Faith in Jesus Christ is not about you being a better version of yourself or accepting who you are or loving yourself. It's about life with God! It would do our tradition a great service to remember the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q1: What is the chief end of man? A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever and this cannot be accomplished apart from faith in Jesus.

Luke 3:10-14 “¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” **ESV**

Mark 4:14-15 “¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is

fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” **ESV**

Acts 19:1-7 “And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ² And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” ³ And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” ⁴ And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all.” **ESV**

Second question. What is the significance of John's appearance? V4-6 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.” His appearance and diet, as well as his message, gave indication to all his call as a prophet of God. It linked him to the Prophets of Old, especially Elijah. Everything about John the Baptist distinguished him from the religious establishment of his day, especially his message. “Repent and be baptized”. So, what are we to take from this? As disciples of Jesus, we too should be different. In some ways outwardly, but more important inwardly and this difference should be evident to all, especially nonbelievers. I think there is a text that gives greater insight into what we are to take from this portion of our text.

Matt 23:1-11 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,² “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses.³ So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach.⁴ They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.⁵ “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels.⁶ And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues.⁷ They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’⁸ “Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters.⁹ And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your Father.¹⁰ And don’t let anyone call you ‘Teacher,’ for you have only one teacher, the Messiah.¹¹ The greatest among you must be a servant.” **NLT**

Here’s the point. Humility is a distinguishing mark of faith in God through Jesus and should define and shape our lives.

Third question. Why did John possess such disdain for the religious establishment of his day. V7-10 “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.” Why such disdain for the religious establishment of his

day, hypocrisy. That is, putting on the face, pretending, acting, concealing one's true motives or beliefs. Hypocrisy is a tremendous turn-off, and hypocrites discredit the word of God. Leading people astray. And listen! Jesus shared John the Baptist sentiments towards the religious establishment of that day.

Matt 23:13-15, 25-28, 33 “¹³“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves...²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness...³³You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” **ESV**

Let these words of Jesus the Christ be a warning to us who are simply putting on the face.

Final question. What is baptism with the fire? V11-12 “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. ¹²His 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.” **This**

baptism is the baptism that all who reject Christ will undergo via the fire of hell. I recognize no one wants to talk about hell and especially during Advent, but the truth of the matter is hell is a real eternal place that no one who ends up there will escape. Considering this biblical fact, it is critical that we, the Church, talk about it, especially during Advent. For it is during this season that we not only celebrate Jesus' first coming but look toward his second coming. And John's words here provide great clarity into the mood of that coming. "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".

Matt 13:24-30 ["]²⁴ Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. ²⁵ But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. ²⁶ When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. ²⁷ "The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' ²⁸ "'An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. "'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. ²⁹ "'No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'" NLT

This is baptism by fire. Lord Jesus, let not this be the end result for anyone under the sound of my voice. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**