

“The Word of God Came to John...”

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

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We begin today with a prophecy from the book of Malachi. Malachi is the last of the minor prophets, and the last book in the Old Testament. It was written about 450 years before the birth of Jesus. Generally speaking, the book is a call for greater faithfulness to God – greater faithfulness on the part of both the priests and the common people. The book also contains a prophecy about the future coming of the Lord. “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming...” (Malachi 3:1) Malachi compares the Lord to a “refiner’s fire;” he says the Lord will “purify the descendants of Levi [i.e., the priests] and refine them like gold and silver.” (Malachi 3:2-3). The result of the Lord’s coming is that “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.” (Malachi 3:4) He’s talking about Jesus, of course, although like all the other prophets he does not identify Jesus by name.

This is, of course, one of many prophecies about the coming of Jesus, prophecies that we recall to mind every year in the weeks leading up to Christmas. But this one also predicts the coming of someone else, someone who will come *before* Jesus: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” (Malachi 3:1) Somebody is coming – a messenger from the Lord – who will prepare the people’s hearts for the coming of Jesus. Malachi is predicting the arrival of John the Baptist.

We meet John the Baptist, as a baby, in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. John’s father was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem; his name was Zechariah. John’s mother was named Elizabeth. Luke describes them both as “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” (Luke 1:6) They were “getting on in years” (Luke 1:7) and they had no child, despite their fervent prayers. But then, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, telling him that God has heard their prayers: “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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 1:13-17) That will be John’s mission, his special mission on God’s behalf, to prepare people’s hearts for the coming of Jesus. John will be that “messenger” whom Malachi had predicted four and a half centuries earlier.

Gabriel’s visit to Zechariah took place six months before Gabriel made a similar visit to a young woman named Mary. Indeed, Mary and Elizabeth were related to each other; they may have been cousins. Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth’s unborn son John came into the presence of

Mary's unborn son Jesus, tiny little John leaped for joy. Even before these two special children were born, they had a sense of who each other was. One of them would prepare the way for the other.

John was born about three months later, six months before the birth of Jesus. Many Christian traditions commemorate the birth of John every year on June 24 – exactly six months before Christmas Eve. On the eighth day after his birth, when newborn Jewish boys were circumcised and named, John's father Zechariah offered the prophecy that we heard a few minutes ago. Most of Zechariah's prophecy has to do with the coming of Jesus, and with the good news that would mean for the people of Israel, but a portion of Zechariah's prophecy had to do specifically with John: "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77) John had a destiny.

Luke tells us that John "grew and became strong in spirit." John "was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." (Luke 1:80). About thirty years pass. The Bible tells us nothing about those years in John's life. But then, something happens. "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." (Luke 3:2) John's life suddenly takes a dramatic, and very public, turn.

Luke is quite clear that this happened at a specific point in time. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (Luke 3:1-2) – that's a lot of specific names. Tiberius was the second Roman Emperor; he reigned from 14 to 37 AD. Pontius Pilate was the Roman-appointed Governor of the region of Judea, which included Jerusalem; he governed from about 26 to 36 AD. The "Herod" named here is one of the sons of Herod the Great; he was the Governor of a region just west of the Sea of Galilee from 4 BC to 39 AD. Philip was another son of Herod the Great; he was the Governor of a region north-east of the Sea of Galilee from 4 BC to 34 AD. Lysanias was a minor ruler in a territory northwest of Damascus, about whom we know very little. Finally, Luke mentions two Jewish high priests: Annas, who was high priest from 6 to 15 AD; and Caiaphas, Annas's son-in-law, who was high priest from 18 to 36 AD. There was only one high priest at a time. Annas had been removed from office by a previous Roman governor, but he continued to maintain a tremendous presence in Jewish politics and religion for the next twenty-some years. All of these people, with the exception of Lysanias, are tremendously important, and most of them play key roles elsewhere in the Gospel story. Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate were all partly responsible for the execution of Jesus, while Philip and Herod both played a role in the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist. Luke mentions all these rulers to remind us that the Word of God came to John at a particular point in history – probably in the year 29 AD – when some *tremendously* significant political and religious leaders were in key positions of power.

When the Word of God came to John, he began a special and unique form of ministry. This ministry had two primary features. It was, first of all, a *preaching* ministry; John traveled into "all the region around the Jordan" river, proclaiming a message of *repentance*. He encouraged people to *turn away from their sins*. Second, John's ministry had a *material* component: a ritual and symbolic washing of a person's entire body in water. This washing came to be known as "baptism." That word "baptism" came from a Greek verb meaning "to wash" or "to dip" or "to immerse." The verb had been around for at least a hundred years before John; it was in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But the noun "baptism" is not found in any piece of writing prior to John's ministry. It would appear that baptism, as a religious rite, was *invented* by John. Or, rather, *God* invented it, and sent John to *engage* in it. That is

why he came to be called “John the Baptist.” No one before John ever baptized people like he did.

Now, just to be clear, ritual washing had a long history in Judaism before John. It shows up a number of times in the Old Testament; for example, Jews who came into contact with a corpse were required by the Law of Moses to bathe in water before they could return to worship in the temple. That’s just one of a number of similar provisions. In each case, the idea was that the person had become impure, and the ritual washing restored them to a state of purity. It was a *purification* ritual.

But what we have with John is something more than just a *purification* ritual. For in Jewish tradition, a person could enter a state of impurity many, many times, for a lot of conditions that had practically nothing to do with sin, and each time they would need to go through the process of ritual washing to return to a state of purity. John’s baptism was very different. It was directly linked to his preaching ministry. He was inviting people to *change their lives*: to repent, to turn from their sins, to make a break with their past. This was much broader, and more life-altering, than traditional Jewish practice. It wasn’t so much about *purification*. It was more about *initiation* – the beginning of a new way of life. It was *voluntary* – no priest and no law of Moses was commanding them to do it. It was something people could do when they wanted to begin a new life with God. John’s preaching ministry probably helped people learn the difference between right and wrong, and John’s ministry of baptism gave them an opportunity to make a significant, and symbolic, break with their past. Huge crowds of people were attracted to John’s ministry. Huge numbers of people wanted to be baptized by him.

Indeed, John’s ministry of preaching and baptism was so significant that it got mentioned in an account of the Jewish people that was written near the end of the first century by a man named Josephus, a Jewish historian. Josephus says that John was a “good man who was exhorting the Jews to live upright lives, in dealing justly with one another and submitting devoutly to God, and to join in baptism.” The baptism that John offered, says Josephus, was not only a “purification for the body,” it was also “a pardon for sins” for those whose “soul had previously been cleansed through upright conduct.” Josephus mentions the “crowds” that were “quite enthusiastic in listening to his words” – crowds that became so large that Herod Antipas “became frightened” that it might lead to an uprising. The size of those crowds, Josephus says, was a major reason why Herod Antipas had John arrested.

But that came later. For some fairly lengthy period of time, probably a year or more, John continued his ministry, undeterred, encouraging people to repent and be baptized. This was a fulfillment of prophecy. John turned many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God – as prophesied. He turned 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 – as prophesied. He went before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins – as prophesied.

It was a vital preparation for the ministry of Jesus, that was soon to come. It set the stage. We have no way of knowing how many people who heard John’s message and were baptized by him because followers of Jesus – but I have a feeling it was a lot. Jesus’s ministry might not have flourished if it hadn’t been for John. John prepared the way. John made a path for the Lord that was coming.

The two primary features of John’s ministry still remain essential ingredients in our Christian life today. *Repentance* – voluntarily turning away from all our sins. *Baptism* – the voluntary rite of initiation into this new way of life, with a symbolic washing in water. To be a Christian – we need to do *both*.

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