
PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Back in the days when I was a missionary to Wisconsin, I served a church with Pastor John Hagen.

- We had decided that whenever there was to be a baptism, the one of us that was not preaching would perform the baptism.
- Things worked out so that Pastor Hagen was doing so many of the baptisms that the congregation began to call him John the Baptizer.

I have a story about Pastor John that relates to today's gospel.

- The men's group decided to paint the Fellowship Hall.
 - They had gotten to the last wall when they discovered they were running out of paint, so they decided to thin it with water to make it stretch.
 - The next day when the paint had dried, it was pretty obvious that the diluted paint had not properly covered the wall.
 - The wall was streaked and looked terrible.
 - When the men came that morning to clean up, John the Baptizer was waiting for them and announced, "You must repaint and thin no more!"

Last week, mentioned that it was New Year's Day for the church as we moved from the Year of Luke to the Year of Matthew.

- Matthew's and Luke's Gospels have some obvious differences.
 - In part, it's due to the fact that Luke wrote his gospel for non-Jewish readers,
 - While Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience.
 - Thus, Matthew's Gospel is filled with Old Testament prophecies.
- The people for whom Matthew was writing were very familiar with the Old Testament which they called, since there wasn't a New Testament yet, the Scripture.
 - Matthew, to try to bring them to CHRIST, listed many prophecies about the MESSIAH in such a way as to show them that JESUS fulfilled those prophecies,
 - so therefore, HE was the MESSIAH.

In today's Gospel reading, Matthew talks about John the Baptizer.

- (He really wasn't a Baptist. He was a Jew who baptized a lot of people, so I call him John the "Baptizer.")
- Let me share some information about Matthew that can help us better understand what he wanted us to know about John.

Matthew was one of the twelve disciples.

- He was a tax collector who worked for the Roman government to tax his own people for the Roman occupation of Israel.

Matthew's is one of the synoptic Gospels.

- Synoptic means "seeing together."
 - Matthew, Mark, and Luke are fairly similar with Matthew and Luke both probably using Mark's earlier Gospel.

Matthew's Gospel heavily emphasizes grace and GOD'S acceptance of all people.

- He calls attention to JESUS' unconditional acceptance of and interaction with women, the sick, non-Jews, and those who lived questionable lives, like, you know, tax collectors.
- He speaks frequently about the Kingdom of Heaven, a phrase used only in Matthew and referred to 37 times.
 - Mark and Luke both use the phrase Kingdom of GOD.

Matthew's Gospel also served as an early catechism that taught about the cost of discipleship.

- It calls believers to "give up your old ways and turn to the LORD."
 - It presents both a future hope and a present reality for living in CHRIST.
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A bit about John the Baptizer.

- Again, he wasn't a Baptist referring to the denomination today.
- He was likely a member of the Zealot political part that sought to evict Rome from Israel.
 - Zealots opposed paying taxes or tribute to a pagan emperor.
 - Tithes should only be given to GOD.
 - The Zealots were fiercely loyal to Jewish traditions and they prophesized the coming time of salvation.

John was the child of Zachariah and Elizabeth.

- Zachariah was a descendant of Levi and so shared responsibility for caring for and overseeing the synagogue in his community.
- Elizabeth was a kinswoman of Mary, the mother of JESUS, so she may have been Mary's cousin or aunt.

A frequent call of John's was to repent.

- Repent means to "turn around and go the other way,"
 - to abandon sinful behavior and go back to GOD.
 - It is a call to make a radical change in one's living style.

JESUS called John the Elijah figure.

- Elijah was to return and announce the coming of the MESSIAH.
 - JESUS was saying that John fulfilled that role.
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John is an unusual figure. In his story we find a case of contrasts.

- John's life is a striking exhibition of unlikeness, of making himself different than those he challenged.

The first contrast is between NEEDS and WANTS.

- John wore a garment made of camel hair and ate locust and honey,
 - which was quite different from the clothing of the wealthy and self-indulgent Pharisees and Sadducees who were most interested in power.
 - They would come to listen to John, but not because they wanted to repent.
 - They did it for entertainment, and because being seen near John would help to make them popular with the common people.
- John, however, demonstrated his belief that GOD would provide for his needs.

A second contrast that John spoke of was between HERITAGE and FAITH.

- The Pharisees and Sadducees felt that their relationship with GOD was secure simply because they were descended from Abraham.
 - They were GOD'S chosen people.
 - For them, that was the basis for salvation.
- John, though, claimed that it was whoever had faith and who were baptized by the SPIRIT that would be saved.

A third contrast that John presented was between FRUIT and NO FRUIT.

- John advocated for what JESUS later called the cost of discipleship.
 - It's not enough to just come and watch.
 - You have to show your faith by your actions, your works.
- "Produce fruit," John said. "Perform deeds that cause the Kingdom of GOD to grow and spread."

And a fourth contrast was between SALVATION and JUDGMENT.

- John said that the SAVIOR would baptize with the SPIRIT and with fire.
 - He didn't mean both, though.
 - He meant that if you didn't develop a relationship with GOD through the HOLY SPIRIT, instead you would see fire.
- John used both fire and the ax as symbols of judgment for those who failed to repent.
 - He contrasted the chafe with the seed, and encouraged, rather than being just an empty shell that would be blown away, that one should strive to produce fruit, to multiply and spread.

Perhaps the most important part of John's message is the call to commit to prepare the way of the LORD.

Seminary professor, James Burtness, tells of his mother doing this very thing.

- Mrs. Burtness may have been 83, but she still sought to prepare the way for the coming of CHRIST.

She was at the local K-MART in the town where she lived in Illinois.

- In the checkout line, she was in front of a young boy.
- "I got a watch for \$5.98 including the battery," she told him. "What did you get?"
 - She's very nice and genuine.
 - She likes people.
 - And she's also a Christian.
- She continues to talk to the boy and asks where he goes to Sunday School.
 - He doesn't, so she says, "Oh, I think you'd like it. Could I call your mother and see if I can pick you up?"
 - "We have a children's choir, too. The kids have lots of fun."

Mrs. Burtness calls the boy's mother who says, "No problems."

- So, every Sunday, this 83-year-old lady picks up 10-year-old James and takes him to Sunday School and choir.
 - James' sister asks if she can come.
- There's a concert, and the mother wants to come.
- There's no father, but the mother and the two children pile into Mrs. Burtness' 16-year-old Pontiac for Sunday School and church.
- James has a birthday party and Mrs. Burtness is there, wearing a funny hat with eight 10-year-olds.

In time, the family is firmly established in the congregation.

- Meanwhile, Mrs. Burtness is back at K-MART and the grocery store and talking walks around her apartment complex talking to people and inviting them to church.

Prepare the way of the LORD.

- Make straight paths that will help HIM get to people.
- John may have been a bit odd, but his message was and is important.

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