

## Advent 2 / December 5, 2021

### Luke 3:1-20

#### **“With many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”**

John the baptizer is one of the most intriguing people in the bible. He is a bridge between the testaments; the last prophet of old, the first herald of the new. He is Lord's messenger, prophesied by Micah, who prepared Israel for Jesus' coming. He was blessed by the Spirit to see Jesus as the Christ in His baptism. He was blessed to publicly identify Him as the Saviour, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." His parents were Elizabeth and Zechariah. He was born to them in their old age. A sign that he was a special child with an important task to accomplish. His task was so important that Jesus said, "among those born of women, none is greater than John."

Despite his great place and purpose in the kingdom of heaven, we know nothing about his life before he appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Both his parents were advanced in years when he was born. John was likely orphaned when he was young. God was his protector, in keeping with Psalm 68, which calls the Lord, "Father of the fatherless." John was set apart for the Lord's service from his mother's womb. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah, "He will be great before the Lord... He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

He was the voice prophesied by Isaiah, calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for God." The highway was in the desert of the human heart. John straightened it, by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He didn't mince his words. He spoke the law powerfully and applied it according to its purpose, to reveal sin. In the letter to the Romans Paul wrote, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Nevertheless, John preached good news. It's good to see our sins, so that in repentance we may see our Saviour. John preached the Law, which shows us the reality of our sins, so we may escape their deadly effects in time and eternity. John preached the law in order to lead us to Jesus, in whom we have redemption from sin and death through the forgiveness of our sins. That's good news! In fact, more than good news, it's the greatest news!

Have you ever received bad news, that was really good news in disguise? Bad news is good news when we respond to it in a manner that benefits our lives. It's bad news when the doctor tells you your diet is clogging your arteries and damaging your heart. It's good news when you take her words to heart and change your diet! Nobody likes to be told they are doing something wrong! But if a mistake isn't identified and corrected, it will be perpetuated and produce more errors with increasing magnitude as time passes. Bad news is good news, when we take chastisement for our sins to heart and deal with it positively by turning to Jesus.

The bad news is that since the sin of our original ancestors we are sold to sin, under the influence of the devil and our own sinful nature and under the condemnation of death. We are naturally sinful. We sin in thought, word and deed; through action and by inaction. As Paul said in the letter to the Ephesians, we are naturally, "without God and without hope in the world." The proof is the universal prevalence of death. The ultimate effect of sin is death. Death comes to everyone, because we all sin and fall short of the righteousness of God. That's bad news. It makes us angry. It tells us we are not as good as we think. It's good news, if we take it to heart, despair of our own sense of goodness and turn to Christ for mercy.

John was a preacher of good news. His preaching led those who had ears to hear to Jesus, in whom we have forgiveness. John was a preacher of the law. He shows us our sins. He was also a prophet. He shows us our Saviour. When he was circumcised and named John, his father said, "You 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 in the forgiveness of their sins." John shows us our need for salvation, by showing us our sins. John gives us knowledge of salvation by leading us to Jesus, in whom we receive salvation in the forgiveness of His cross. We truly come to Jesus, when we come to Him as our Saviour. We come to Jesus as our Saviour, when we come to Him with our sins. When we come to Him with our sins, He lifts their burden from our backs in the forgiveness of His cross. When the law has finished speaking, Jesus calls us to Himself as Saviour saying, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." Repentance is to come to Jesus for forgiveness.

John was popular with the people, which is surprising, because he obviously wasn't out to win a popularity contest. He called the crowds that flocked to hear him, "a brood of vipers." He asked, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" He chastised them, demanding, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." He told them plainly to cast aside their pedigree and self-righteousness, saying, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." He said they should become like Abraham. Abraham was a man of faith. John was telling these people they needed to approach God through faith and not on the basis of their works. Fruit in keeping with repentance are works that flow out of a relationship with God that is founded on faith in God; His love and promise to forgive.

John was popular, not because he spoke pleasing words, or because people appreciated being called a brood of vipers. I expect those who wanted to hear nice things about themselves, beat a hasty retreat and went looking for a prophet who said things they liked to hear. The people who appreciated John were the ones who took his words to heart, got past the feeling of insult, saw their sins, confessed their need for God's mercy and received baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. John was a true prophet of the Lord, because he spoke the truth with love. John was popular, because he spoke the truth of our sinfulness. John was popular, because he preached good news and baptized for the forgiveness of sins. In this he prepared people to receive Jesus their Saviour.

It may be unpopular, but the truth is that we are by nature sinful and unclean. It may be unpopular, but the truth is that our most righteous deeds are like filthy rags in comparison with the holiness of God. It may be unpopular, but the truth is that no matter how hard we try, we can never measure up to the standard of perfect righteousness which God's Law demands. It may be unpopular, but when we take that truth to heart and come to Jesus in repentance, He lifts the burden of sin from our hearts in forgiveness and sets us free to live with God in peace. John speaks the truth in love, so that seeing our sins and need for forgiveness, we would come to Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins, Jesus our Saviour! That's good news! That's the greatest news!

During this season of Advent, let us press on to know the Lord more fully in the word. Let us prepare for Jesus' second advent, by drinking the bread and wine of holy communion, believing His promise of forgiveness. Let us resist the allurements of the world, the enticement of the devil and our sinful nature, by returning to the promise of our baptism and seeking the help of the Holy Spirit. Let us persevere in faith, as we suffer the effects of sin in this broken world. Let us forgive one another sincerely from the heart, even as God forgives us from the heart of His love in Christ. Let us call upon the Lord for mercy that we may receive grace to help in all our needs, for that is what it means to repent. He who called us is faithful. He will keep us in faith until the day of Christ Jesus. In His name. Amen!