

## CHRISTMAS - WHEN THE WORLD STARTS TO TURN ON ITS HINGES

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**Mark 1:1-8** - "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, [3] the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" [4] John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. [7] And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. [8] I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

I need to make just one introductory comment. There are people who are troubled by Mark's reference to the prophet Isaiah in the second verse - "**As it is written in Isaiah the prophet....**" The feeling of some is Mark has blundered here. You can YouTube Bruxy Cavey calling this an error on Mark's part. The quote, critics say, is from **Malachi**, not **Isaiah**. So they say let's just be honest about it. There's no need to cling hopelessly to these naive notions of inerrancy any longer.

I disagree with these statements and I don't think it's unloving to challenge them. While this kind of edgy talk generates internet hits, I think the speakers are all probably aware - or at least **should** be aware - that Mark's words are, in fact, a **composite quotation** from **Isaiah 40:3**, **Exodus 23:20**, and **Malachi 3:1**.

Without getting too technical, these passages are used by Mark **all together** because in the exegetical tradition of the rabbis these texts were usually grouped under the conviction that the "**messenger of the covenant**" to which they all refer in different illustrative ways, would culminate in the visible return of **Elijah** before the great "**day of the Lord**."

So Mark saying he is referring to Isaiah is no more in error than if you asked me if Reni was in the car with me today and I, in fact, had Reni and Brayden and Jack with me at the same time and answered "**Yes**," to your question. There were **more** with me than just Reni. But I'm not in error telling you Reni was present. Mark needs no defending here. And the church needs to know how to lovingly engage in contending for truth.

In fact, all of this talk of the return of Elijah is a good place to launch into today's teaching. All of Israel was leaning into the words of this cluster of Old Testament prophets. They heard the prophets tell them they were waiting for the return of Elijah. And all four gospel writers affirm Elijah had come, though not in the way the Jewish people had been thinking. John the Baptist was the coming of Elijah.

Look again at our opening text - **Mark 1:1-3** - "**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, [3] the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight....'**"

Are we a bit surprised that Mark announces the "**beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ**," and then says nothing immediately about Jesus at all, but announces John the Baptist? For that matter, do we find it a bit strange that the closing words of Old Testament - at least our Old Testaments - wrap up with the promised coming, not first of all of the Messiah, but John the Baptist?

It's true: **Malachi 4:5-6** - "**Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. [6] And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.**"

John the Baptist is heralded. Then there's just a period. Four hundred years of prophetic silence. Don't take these prophetic words about Elijah lightly. The Hebrew Bible doesn't end the way our Old Testament ends. It ends with First and Second Chronicles as one book.

You're witnessing the biggest difference in our Bibles. The Christian order of these Old Testament books takes its cue from the interpretation placed on these prophets by our Lord Himself. In a way Jewish doctrine has never accepted, Jesus saw all of these prophets pointing to **Himself**. Our Old Testaments end with recorded words of prophetic anticipation. The Old Covenant left off anticipating **the Christ**. And that's why your Old Testament doesn't end with Chronicles. That's why it ends waiting for the Messiah. But first comes John the Baptist.

All through those four hundred years between the testaments the Jewish people were waiting for Elijah, who, you will remember, didn't physically die but was translated by God. And the expectation was he would return. He would return as he left. And his return would initiate the final age - the final triumph of God. Here's the main thing to notice. ***Elijah's return would set the end times into motion.*** When Elijah returned the ***next*** person to return was ***God***. The end would arrive. Wrong would be righted. Enemies would be put down. Sin would be judged. Justice would reign. Righteousness would triumph.

But Old Testament Elijah didn't arrive. ***John the Baptist*** did. And we can't imagine the scene no matter how often we have read it. John bursts on the scene ***electrifying the crowds*** with the announcement that - get this - ***"the kingdom of heaven - of God - is at hand!"*** - and, ***"Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!"***

Everything the people had longed for and everything the prophets had promised was here. Every one of the four gospel writers agree on this. They all bear witness of the fulfillment of all those words about the coming of ***Elijah*** in the person of John the Baptist. In fact, in our text Mark actually stuns his readers with his opening words - ***"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"*** (Mark 1:1).

Think about it. There is no gospel story that doesn't begin with John the Baptist. There is no Christmas coming to the church that doesn't begin with this insect eating, un-showered wild man, John the Baptist.

Now here's my Christmas question this morning. ***Why can't the gospel come without John the Baptist?*** Why does everyone's hair have to stand on end before we're ready to see the baby in the manger - that "holy infant so tender and mild," with "radiant beams" shining from His chubby little face? Why does the Gospel - why ***must Christmas*** - come ***after*** John the Baptist?

#### 1) **JOHN REMINDS US THAT WHILE THE GOSPEL REACHES EVERY CULTURE, IT ACCOMMODATES NO CULTURE**

When our girls were little we used to buy ***Advent Calendars***. They were covered with little doors and each week of advent - each day in some cases - you would open another door on the calendar and there would be a picture, a verse, and, most importantly, a piece of chocolate. And even though the liturgy of Advent contains two weeks of teaching on John the Baptist I have never seen him in any Advent calendar.

We might as well just admit it. It's hard to know what to do with John the Baptist. John didn't fit into his own time and he doesn't fit into ours either. In fact, that may be the most striking feature about John. He doesn't ***fit*** anywhere. He is the visible reminder of what it is to be ***prophetically out of sync*** with his own culture's values, or our culture's values, or any culture's values. He's the model of a person who is single-mindedly tuned into the kingdom of Christ. Find me another purpose in John the Baptist's life other than getting everyone ready for the Christ.

His whole life resists anything that would distract from glorying in the Christ. He is a picture of life stripped down to essentials. John models life-style repentance in his very bones. Years later baby Jesus all grown up will repeat verbatim John's holy words, ***"Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"***

John carries this repentance in his bones in a way sinless Jesus never could. That's why the gospel must ***begin*** with John. We ***need*** John the Baptist. You look at John and you're looking at resistance to compromise. Take the person of John the Baptist and place him in any time or place you choose. He doesn't nestle down comfortably there. That's why John features prominently in all four gospels.

True, Christ's kingdom comes a-flowing with grace in abundance in Jesus. The worst of sinners is invited. But John comes first. We're not to be fooled. Repentance has to run deep. There are no compromising entry points into the kingdom ushered in with that cute little baby in the manger.

#### 2) **WE NEED JOHN THE BAPTIST TO ACCOUNT FOR THE UNRELENTING WICKEDNESS STILL OPPOSING THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

We sing some delusional songs this time of year. Here's one of the most bizarre:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Let your heart be light  
From now on our troubles will be out of sight

Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
 Make the Yuletide gay  
 From now on our troubles will be miles away.

Does anyone really believe this? All our troubles will be miles away? How shall we account for millions of people singing something not a single one of them sincerely believes? What is the root of such truth-denial? Are we just grasping at straws - reaching for anything that brings some kind of temporary relief from the jarring reality of the world in which we have to live?

Here you sit this morning. Your troubles aren't out of sight. And O how you wish they were miles away - perhaps gone, never to return! But they aren't miles away. Or inches. They're pressing in. They are clawing at the fringes of your life - unemployment - sickness - loneliness - guilt - regret - worry - fear.

This is where John the Baptist comes on the scene with a shocking message of hope. Mr. Advent has a message of Christmas realism that speaks into troubles that aren't far away or out of sight. This scruffy Elijah-clone is bursting with an announcement for a trouble-filled world:

**Matthew 3:10-12 - "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. [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. [12] 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."**

This is the text I had in mind when I titled this teaching - "***Christmas - When the World Starts to Turn on its Hinges.***" I said **starts** to turn. By the time John utters these words Jesus isn't a baby anymore. He is well on His pathway of redemptive sacrifice and resurrection. He's about to conquer sin and death.

All of this is beginning. Listen for the squeaking hinges. Something revolutionary is coming. And John has his usual pungent way of seeing some of the details through the limits of his own understanding. Something is unfolding in the Christ that **isn't the end** but is the **beginning of the end** - "***Even now - right now - "the axe is laid to the root of trees."***"

Do you see the image John paints? The axe isn't doing the **chopping** yet. The trees aren't felled - **yet**. But the old is about to be chopped down. The new is about to dominate. It's not fully here yet. But the massive door of the old age is starting to creak on its hinges.

We have never needed John the Baptist more. His is the vision that keeps us all from **domesticating Advent**. He's the one telling us God has put a death sentence on all that is opposed to His will. He's the one telling us we need to keep looking to the future. That all that opposes the Christ is doomed. That all who look prophetically to the future will see the glory of a kingdom fully come.

O, how we need John the Baptist. He stands boldly on the cutting edge of a new beginning. To all who weary of corruption and greed and lying and dashed hopes and unanswered prayers, John speaks. All resistance will meet the unstoppable force of the One whose sandals John is not worthy to tie. The axe is now laid at the root of all that would resist God's final reign. The whole corrupt tree will fall. It's not the end yet. But it's the beginning of the end.

### 3) **WE NEED JOHN TO REMIND US THE COMING KINGDOM HAS A PRESENT KING AND WE ARE UNDER HIS AUTHORITY**

More than anything else John is a man who stays at his post. He is constantly **on mission**. In the face of posh religious institutions before whom he could have made a name for himself his only concern is exposing sin and corruption and pointing to the Lamb who could take it away. John can't be bribed with praise or intimidated by power. There is not one ounce of compromise in John. That's why there is no Christmas without the pattern of John the Baptist.

In the face of danger he'll tell a king it's a sin to sleep with his brother's wife. No matter it will eventually cost him his life - his head barbarically served up on a platter along with the rest of the sandwiches.

John stays at his post. Second only to our Lord, he may be the most single-minded man ever to live. He never switches

subjects. And he won't be silenced. And, again, there is no Christmas before John the Baptist comes. And none without his example.

Christmas people in the true sense are never going to have an easy time of it. They are constantly being called to point to another King and kingdom. It means relinquishing what most people cherish and devoting oneself to what most cultures consider either a waste of time or grossly unacceptable. Advent isn't for sissies.

And yet, if our Bibles mean anything at all, all four gospels tell us there is no Christmas gospel coming into the manger until John the Baptist comes first. He speaks before we ever hear a word from our Lord. And he tells us the biggest news ever. The baby in the manger only *seems* sweet and cuddly in the carol.

So listen closely on that silent night. If all the angels stopped their singing for a minute you might hear something you can't identify. So far it's just a faint low squeaking sound in the background. The axe is laid at the root of all that will resist this newborn Babe. The whole fallen world is starting to turn on its hinges. One day the trumpet will sound. Advent two will finish what Advent one began.