

Message #4

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John

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JOHN THE BAPTIST

AND DRAINING THE SWAMP

JOHN 1:19-28

I.

When I was in high school in about my freshman year, my dad bought a piece of property about five miles from the town in which we lived in Wisconsin. He had done well in business and had this vision of having a house in the woods with lakes around it. The land that he bought was mostly woodland. It had a stream running through it with swampy areas in several places.

Toward the front of the property, the previous owner had pushed up a dike to dam the stream. During the winter he had taken his bulldozer, gone out on the ice and just mowed down the trees at the waterline. So this area still looked like a swamp.

My dad then took a bulldozer that he had purchased and removed part of the dike the next summer. One evening he placed dynamite on the last part of the dike that needed to be removed in order for the water to flow and the swamp to be drained. Back then it was not too difficult to purchase dynamite. With the rest of the family watching from a distance and behind a vehicle, he lit the fuse and ran over to us. We watched the explosion that followed. It was pretty cool--- better than any firecracker experiences that I had seen. The water flowed, and the swamp began to drain.

In the winter when the land froze and the stream largely stopped, he began clearing out the swamp with the bulldozer and with the help of other equipment. Eventually there was a beautiful five or six acre lake. A house was built, and kids and eventually grandkids enjoyed the place. Unfortunately it is no longer in the family.

There was a certain political candidate who ran for high office last year who said that he was going to Washington to drain the swamp. That mantra found a certain appeal among many voters. There is a general distaste among the electorate about cronyism and corruption and special interests who are involved with government. Voters get a bad taste when they see elected public servants come out of office richer than when they went in.

The passage before us this morning describes a historical character who set out to drain the swamp in his day. He was going up against a religious and political establishment that had become corrupt. He also saw his job as preparing the way for the establishment of a spiritual house--- a kingdom--- and the king who would rule it.

We are working our way through the New Testament Gospel According to John. We have seen that the Apostle John was writing several decades after the other three gospels had been written. Much of his material about the life of Jesus is therefore unique to his book. He makes a clear statement of his purpose in Chapter 20. He has organized his material around seven miracles which are designed to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, with the intended result that readers will come to a saving faith in this Jesus. He also describes several witnesses who point to this conclusion about Jesus. John the Baptist is the first. We shall see what we have to learn from him today.

II.

In vv. 19-23 of #1 we encounter JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING OUR IDENTITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE...) We are going to begin by looking at v. 19, which is found on p. 886 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs. The Apostle John writes, "**And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'**"

This is John the Baptist who is in view. In the previous two paragraphs the Apostle John described him as a witness to the coming divine Word, who is Jesus. Bill read for us some of the details of John the Baptist's ministry as described in the Gospel of Luke. Chapter 1 of that book describes his background. His father was a priest, but he and his wife Elizabeth had been unable to have children. One day when he was serving in the temple, an angel appeared to him and said that he was going to have a special son who would be involved in preparing the Jews for the coming of the Lord. His name was to be John, and so he was born.

In the story about the birth of Jesus we find that Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who is further along in her pregnancy than Mary is. We learn that the two mothers are relatives. So we learn that Jesus and John are somehow related, and John is a few months older than Jesus.

In Luke #1 v. 80 (LUKE 1:80) we find this additional bit of information about John's background: "**And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.**" There is no further description about his earlier years. But the description about his residence in the wilderness would remind some Jewish readers about another prophet.

This is reinforced by the description of him in Mark's gospel. In #1 v. 6 (MARK 1:6) we read, "**Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.**" We recently looked at the life of Elijah. This description will remind some of you about similarities that relate to Elijah's life in the wilderness when there was a drought in the northern kingdom of Israel.

In the Scripture that Bill read earlier from Luke #3, we are given a specific time setting for the beginning of John's ministry. (LUKE 3:1,2) In vv. 1 & 2 of #3 we read, "**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.**" We know from Roman history that the rule of Tiberius Caesar began in 14 AD. That means that John the Baptist's public ministry began around 29 AD. Unlike the prophet and evangelist Jonah, who was called to go to the city, John hung out in the wilderness. But like Jonah, John's message had a negative tone to it. He called upon his fellow Jews to repent and to turn from their sins. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our earlier reading from Luke spoke of multitudes who were coming to John. The establishment is typically concerned about popular movements that arise over which they have little or no control. So representatives from the establishment were sent to check out John.

Verse 19 in our passage says that "the Jews" sent out a delegation to visit John. I pointed out last time that the term "the Jews" appears 70 times in this gospel. A couple of times it has a neutral or even positive connotation. But most of the time, as is the case here, it refers to the Jewish religious establishment, which will stand in opposition to Jesus. John is not going to win a popularity contest with them.

The Roman governor was Pontius Pilate. He was the top legal and civil authority in the Roman province of Judea. (PROJECTOR ON--- JUDEA MAP) But most of the regular governance of the province was carried out by a religious body called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was comprised of 70 leaders plus the high priest. These leaders included priests and rabbis and leading laymen of the province. This was the establishment. This was the swamp that needed to be drained.

We know from writings in the Bible and outside of the Bible that there were troublemakers who arose in Judea in this general time period, some of whom claimed to be Israel's Messiah. So it was to be expected that the Sanhedrin would check out some character who was attracting a lot of people and who was making religious claims about himself and someone else. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The delegation was comprised of priests and Levites. All priests were descendants of the tribe of Levi, but not all Levites were priests. Only those who could show their descent from Aaron were qualified to be priests. Other members of the tribe of Levi served in the temple as singers and gatekeepers and

temple police. Perhaps it was Levites functioning as police who came along with the priests to find out about John.

According to v. 20, **"He [John] confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"** "Christ" means "anointed one." In the Old Testament prophets and priests and kings were anointed with oil. Olive oil was poured on their heads, signifying that they were being appointed to important positions. But the hope among many of the Jews was that "the" anointed one was coming. They were looking for the Messiah who would kick out the Romans and establish an independent Jewish kingdom. The wording that the Apostle John uses here indicates that John the Baptist strongly denied that he was the Messiah.

Verse 21: **"And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.'"** Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament. In the last two verses of his book (PROJECTOR ON-- MALACHI 4:5) he writes, **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. (MALACHI 4:6) 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."** Thus ends the Old Testament.

John the Baptist had clothing similar to that of Elijah. He lived in the wilderness, as did Elijah. He had a similar message. They both told their countrymen to repent. So it was understandable that some thought that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy. But John clearly said that he was not Elijah.

This causes something of a problem in our understanding of other New Testament passages. For in Matthew #11 vv. 13 & 14 (MATTHEW 11:13-14), Jesus declares, **"For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."** Notice first that John seems to be included among the prophets by Jesus. But also Jesus says that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy.

In Luke # 1 v. 17 the author records the prophecy that was originally given to Zecharias in the temple concerning the mission of his son. (LUKE 1:17) We are told, **"...and he [John] will go before him [the coming Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."** The best solution to this problem seems to be that John knew that he was not literally Elijah. Jesus would later indicate that John the Baptist came in the power and the spirit of Elijah. He was a partial fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy. But there would be a second coming of Jesus. This time He would be preceded by a literal return to earth of Elijah.

The Sanhedrin delegation then asks John if he is the Prophet. The reference here is to Deuteronomy #18. (DEUTERONOMY 18:18) There Moses is quoting the voice of the Lord, saying, **"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. (DEUTERONOMY 18:19) And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him."** The Jewish leaders realized that there had been many prophets in Israel since the time of Moses, but none of them fit the special designation that had been made in Deuteronomy. It was not clear to them exactly what this Prophet would be like. The fact that they had separate questions to John about whether he was the Christ or the Prophet indicates that they did not see these two designations as fitting the same person. The early church would recognize that Jesus fulfilled both prophecies. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Some commentators have also noted the increasing brevity of John's responses to his questioners. To the question about being the Messiah, John responds with five words, in Greek and in English. To the second question he replies with two words in Greek. To the third he responds with a one word answer. The delegation is not getting a lot out of John.

In v. 22 in our passage we find this: **"So they said to him, 'Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'"** I imagine that the representatives marked off all of the possibilities on their sheets and came to the box: None of the above. So they wanted more information.

Verse 23: **"He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.'" John sees himself as simply a voice. Two Sundays ago we saw the Apostle John describe him as a "witness." Last week in v. 15 we saw John the Baptist say that he was of a much lower rank than the One he was representing. A little while ago we saw from Matthew 11:13 that Jesus implied that John was a prophet.**

A couple of verses earlier, in Matthew 11:11 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 11:11), Jesus said this about John: **"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."** Think of all of the heroes of the Old Testament--- Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel. From the perspective of Jesus, none of them were greater than John the Baptist. Yet John, as far as we know, never performed a miracle. He never led his people in a military battle. He never served as a king. He never left any kind of organization behind. He never had any kids. He apparently had little money. He did not have any impressive titles. No one called him "Father John," or "Bishop John," or "Apostle John." (PROJECTOR OFF) He was simply a voice, a witness, a forerunner. The big deal was Jesus. He understood who he was in the big scheme of things. He understood his identity.

It is important likewise that we understand something about our identity. Who are we as human beings? Are we simply the product of materialistic evolution? If that is who we are, we might as well live it up and have as much pleasure as we can in the brief years of our earthly lives.

Are we basically good, moral creatures? Are the biggest problems that we see in the world around us the result of evil political and economic structures? One hundred years ago this past week the Bolshevik Revolution took place in Russia. The Communists decided that those evil capitalistic and royal structures needed to be overthrown. Seventy years later the Communist system that they put in place collapsed. In its wake, the Communists left millions of fellow citizens dead. In the early years, many of them were fellow Communists who were destroyed by their own people.

The Bible says that we human beings are valuable creatures made in the image of God. But we are deeply flawed by a sin nature. We are inclined toward sin. We are people who need a Savior. We are people who need Jesus.

As Christians we need to turn to the Bible to learn about our identity. In the situations in life in which we find ourselves, we need to have divine direction to understand who we are and what we are to become. One of the lessons from our passage is that as Christians we are to recognize that we are to be witnesses for Jesus. We are not to be about bringing attention and glory to ourselves but rather to Jesus, the Savior of the world.

III.

In vv. 23-26 we deal with JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING OUR MISSION. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE...) Look at the second part of v. 23: **"Make straight the way of the Lord.' as the prophet Isaiah said."**

This is a quotation from Isaiah #40 v. 3. In the setting of Isaiah #40, after the way of the Lord was set straight, the promise was that the glory of the Lord would appear. In the Ancient Near East when a king visited a city, he would first send an advance man. The advance man would tell the city that the king was coming for a visit. One of the practical things that the residents of the city would do was to fix up the road leading to the gate of the city. The pot holes were filled. The ridges were smoothed out. Some of the curves were straightened out. Isaiah was speaking in a metaphorical sense. The idea was that the Jewish people were to get their act together in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

John the Baptist was speaking in a similar fashion. The swamp needed to be drained. The people needed to get their act together. The religious leaders needed to turn away from corruption and hypocrisy. All of

the Jews needed to turn from sin and pursue a right relationship with God. This was necessary so that they would recognize the Messiah when He came and receive Him as such.

Verse 24 in our translation reads, "**(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)**" There is considerable uncertainty among the scholars about how to properly translate this verse. The consensus among the commentators is that the sense of the verse is that the Pharisees in this delegation ask the next question.

The Pharisees were a religious group that dominated the rabbis of the day. The priests, at least the leading priests, tended to be dominated by a group called the Sadducees. The Pharisees were more influential among the people of Judea as a whole. For they were spread out throughout the country. They were like pastors today. Synagogues throughout Judea were often led by rabbis. They tended to be Pharisees.

The Pharisees were legalists. They took the law of God very seriously. They sought to apply the Mosaic law to all of the situations of life that had arisen in the centuries that had followed the original giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. So they came up with all kinds of rules that the people were supposed to follow. They often placed more attention on the rules than upon the original laws that were given by God. For example, they came up with hundreds of rules concerning how a Jew was supposed to act on the Sabbath. If you violated these rules, you were sinning against God. One of these rules was that there was not supposed to be any healing on the Sabbath. So when Jesus came along and healed people on the Sabbath, the Pharisees decided that Jesus had to be a bad guy.

It is these Pharisees who are behind the question posed to John in v. 25. "**They asked him, 'Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'**" The Jews in following the law of Moses had a variety of cleansings that involved being dipped in water. Archaeologists have discovered lots of bathtubs outside of synagogues throughout Judea, many of which date to this time period. The Hebrew term that was used for them was *miqvot*. Before entering the synagogue Jews would sometimes dip themselves in these *miqvot*. When Jews became ceremonially unclean by doing such things as touching a dead animal, they would go to the synagogue and dip themselves in the *miqvah*--- singular for *miqvot*.

In this situation John is doing the baptism, and he is connecting what he is doing with repentance and the coming of the messianic kingdom. So his baptism has a closer connection to what the Jews did when Gentiles converted to Judaism. When a Gentile male converted to Judaism, he was circumcised and he was immersed in a *miqvah* as a sign of repentance and entrance into the Jewish community.

But here John the Baptist is immersing Jewish people, and they are not immersing themselves, he is baptizing them. John was from a priestly line. But he has received no authorization to do this from the Sanhedrin. These Jewish people were already right with God because they were circumcised descendants of Abraham. This John was a loose canon. He had no authority to do this.

Verse 26: "**John answered them, 'I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know...'**" In other places in the gospels John speaks of one who is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Here he simply says that there is one standing among them whom these representatives of the Sanhedrin do not know. There is someone lurking around that they should know and recognize. But they do not. It is implied that they should be able to spot him. We begin to see here a theme of spiritual blindness among the religious leaders, which the Apostle John will trace in the development of his gospel.

The point here is that John understood his mission. Jesus Christ later says that John the Baptist was a very significant human being. But much of that significance was related to the fact that his life was focused on his mission. His mission was not to get rich, not to be famous, not to win a popularity contest, not to become powerful. His job was to drain the swamp. It was to get people ready to recognize and receive the coming Messiah.

That is a significant part of our mission as well. The Westminster Shorter Catechism declares that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. A significant part of that mission to glorify God involves being a witness for Jesus.

Our particular circumstances and abilities and opportunities determine the specifics of our mission. Our specific mission will relate to our status as mates and parents and students and workers and neighbors and caregivers. We need prayer to get direction from God to recognize the opportunities that we are to pursue. Our mission may involve volunteerism in the community or in the church. It may involve giving attention to family members and mates. In the end it should involve some kind of witness for Jesus.

IV.

In the last two verses of our passage we are exposed to JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING WHOM WE SERVE. (IV. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE...) In v. 27 John speaks of "**...even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.**"

In v. 7 John the Baptist was described as a witness of the light. In v. 15 the object of John's witness was described as one who was before him. Now Jesus is described as one who comes after him.



The reference to footwear in v. 27 involves the strap that tied a sandal to one's foot. There was an ancient saying among the rabbis (RABBI QUOTATION) that went like this: **"All manner of service that a slave must render to his master, the pupil must render to his teacher--- except that of taking off his shoe."** Untying a man's sandals and caring for his feet was regarded as the lowliest duty of a slave. John says that he is not even worthy to do that for Jesus. The object of his service is so much greater than he is that there is no comparison. This comes from one who is described by Jesus as greater than any other person in the Old Testament. John understood something important about the one whom he served. Any and every sacrifice for Jesus on his part was warranted. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 28 concludes, **"These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing."** Here we have a geographic indicator. There was a Bethany just east of Jerusalem where Jesus would stay at night during his last week in Jerusalem. The identity of this other Bethany is unknown to us.

The territory "beyond the Jordan" (PROJECTOR ON--- JUDEA MAP) referred to territory east of the Jordan River and outside of the province of Judea. This was outside of Pilate's control. Most of this territory was in Perea, which was under the control of Herod Antipas. This Herod would eventually arrest John the Baptist and have him killed.

(BETHANY 1) Archaeologists recently discovered a site on the east side of the Jordan River which was a place where early Christians worshiped. The suspicion of some is that this may be where John the Baptist did his baptizing work. (BETHANY 2) The government of Jordan is seeking to develop this as a tourist site that will bring pilgrims into their country.

The main point is that John the Baptist understood whom he served. (PROJECTOR OFF) This made everything else in his life of secondary importance. He was ultimately willing to die for his testimony about Jesus.

On this Veterans' Day weekend we remember those who have served their country in the military. Many of the Christians among them have realized that ultimately they were serving God. In 1943 Private First Class William Kiessel, who was soon to take part in the invasion into France, wrote to friends that he did not want prayer for his safety, because, he said, **"Safety isn't the ultimate goal. True exemplary conduct is."** He added, **"What is important is that whatever does happen to me I will do absolutely nothing that will shame my character or my God."**

One of my favorite movies is "42." (PROJECTOR ON--- 42) It is the story of Jackie Robinson who became the first African-American to break into Major League baseball. Branch Rickey was the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers who succeeded in bringing Robinson onto his team. (ROBINSON AND RICKEY)

Both of these men were Methodists and Christians. Together they faced considerable opposition to the integration of professional baseball. Robinson especially was the object of hatred and racism and discrimination.

When Robinson was in junior college, he got connected with a Methodist pastor named Karl Downs. (ROBINSON AND DOWNS) Downs taught Robinson that exploding in anger was not the Christian answer to injustice. He explained that a life truly dedicated to Christ was not submissive; on the contrary, it was heroic. It required a great deal of self-discipline. Pastor Downs performed the wedding for Jackie Robinson and his wife. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The beginning of the movie pictures Jackie Robinson sitting in the office of Branch Rickey as he gets the news that the manager wants him to play for the Dodgers. Then Rickey warns Robinson about the kinds of bigotry that he will face from hotel managers, restaurant waiters and other baseball players. In reality Rickey also pulled out a copy of a book by Giovanni Papini, *Life of Christ*. He turned to the passage in which the author discussed the Sermon on the Mount. There he referred to Jesus' call to "turn the other cheek" as "**the most stupefying of Jesus' revolutionary teachings.**" He told Robinson that he believed that God had chosen him for the noble purpose of fighting injustice. If he committed himself to following the example of Jesus, God would give him the strength to follow through. Jackie Robinson succeeded as a result of understanding whom he served.

In the end it was not about making a better living for his family. It was not even about breaking through racial barriers to give more opportunities to fellow blacks. In the end it was about serving Jesus. It was about understanding whom he served. That likewise needs to be the bottom line for us. In the midst of the challenges of life, we Christians need to be clear in our own minds that it is Jesus Christ whom we serve.