

John 1: A Voice in the Wilderness: John the Baptist

Sermon by: Silvia Purdie

Verse for the day: John 1:6-8

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Prayer for the day

(an ancient prayer from the early church)

Almighty God, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son; lead us to repent according to his preaching.

Grant us his courage, to boldly speak truth and rebuke sin and to patiently suffer for the truth's sake.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever, amen.

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-9

Gospel: Luke 3:1-15, dramatic reading:

Luke 3:1-15. Dramatic Reading

Narrator: In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was king of Galilee, his brother Philip king of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias king of Abilene —² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet:

Isaiah: A voice cried out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

⁵Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

⁶And all people will see God’s salvation.”

Narrator: ⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him,

John: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit worthy of repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹The axe is already

at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Narrator: the crowd asked

Everyone: ¹⁰ **So what should we do?!**

John: “Anyone who has two shirts should share with someone who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

Narrator: ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized.

Tax collector: “Teacher, what should we do?”

John: ¹³ “Don’t collect any more taxes than you have to,”

Narrator: ¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him,

Soldier: “And what should we do?”

John: “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely — be content with your pay.”

Narrator: ¹⁵ The people were filled with hope and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

Do any of you with long memories remember Christmas Day in 1953? For many New Zealanders their Christmas was utterly ruined by the terrible news on the radio that day. The packed night train from Wellington to Auckland had been swept away by a lahar at Tangiwai. 151 people were dead.

A Taihape man called Cyril Ellis was driving down the road beside the train line at quarter past 10 that night, when he stopped at the flooded out bridge. To his horror he could see the oncoming lights of the train. Somehow he managed to grab a torch, leap from his car and ran as fast as he could back down the line towards the train, waving his torch and no doubt yelling at the top of his voice – STOP!!

The train driver saw him, and slammed on the brakes. Too late, tragically, too late to save his own life or those in the front 4 carriages, but it was enough to save nearly half of the train. The last 3 carriages stayed on the rails, with everyone safe. The 5th carriage tetered for a few moments on the edge of the smashed bridge, and Cyril Ellis leapt on board shouting at everyone to get off, but then it snapped and fell into the waters. Somehow Cyril and a guard managed to get all but one passenger safely out through the violent waters onto the bank. Mr Ellis was awarded a George medal by the Queen for his bravery.

This man reminds me of John the Baptist.

“The axe is at the root of the tree!” he cried out. Repent! Stop! Turn around! We can’t keep going like this! He wasn’t able to stop the train-wreck that Israel became, but like Cyril Ellis he threw himself into the task of warning people, leaping onto the falling carriage with no thought for his own safety or wellbeing. Only for John there were no awards, little congratulations afterwards, only a head on a plate and that head was his own.

But let’s go back to the beginning. Who was this John and why is he such an important part of all four Gospels? Next Sunday I will do John Part 2 and then we’ll talk about Jesus’ baptism and John’s relationship with Jesus, but today I want to just focus on John himself and why he matters.

John was born to an elderly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, in the same year that Jesus was born. Zechariah was a priest, and Elizabeth also was born into a priestly line. They lived in a rural town in Judah, not far from Jerusalem. Back in the day there were some priests who worked full-time in the Temple – the Chiefs Priests, but most priests had other jobs and homes and were on a roster. They would serve in the Temple for a week twice a year. As the son of a priestly family John would have gone on from the compulsory primary schooling for Jewish boys and spent his teenage years learning and learning ... he would have been able to recite the entire Hebrew scriptures precisely, word for word, by the time he was 17. He would have

been trained in law, worship, music, as well as the farming skills required to take up the management of his father's land.

His parents were old. We are not told, but we can assume that they would have passed away while John was still young.

So, there's John, fresh out of training to be a priest, ready to follow in his father's footsteps. He should have married a nice Jewish girl and settled down to grow lettuces and shear sheep and take up his duties in the Temple. But what happens instead Luke describes at the end of chapter 1: "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publically in Israel"

What made John leave the life his father left him?

What wildness stirred him so strongly?

But remember what was happening in Israel ... the Romans ruled. The Romans demanded hefty taxes, plus extra tributes for the Emperor, on top of Temple taxes and tithes. Romans defiled Jewish sacred spaces, soldiers were above the law and could force anyone to do anything pretty much. Taxes were forcing many people off their land, people were getting poorer, communities less stable, while a few benefited as puppets of Roman power. How the Jewish people longed for their land back! How they longed for justice and peace. How they longed for God to show up, to speak, to save, to restore! It had been so long since the days of prophecy, no sign of the Holy Spirit for hundreds of years!

Into this unhappy time the Spirit of God claimed this young man, and grew inside of him a great discontent, so that he could not stay home, he could not farm his land and pay his taxes and put on those priestly garments and climb those steps into the Temple and kill those animals and proclaim God's forgiveness ... he just couldn't do it! The Holy Spirit hurled him away from the life he was born into, out into the wilderness ... just him and the harsh rocks and the words of scripture going around and around in his head. Out there in the desert heat he forged powerful convictions about who God was and what being God's people really meant. So, after a few years, he started preaching, and baptizing, and people came to him from all over Israel to hear him preach and to be baptized.

Being famous and influential, however, is not always a good thing. Do you remember what happened to John the Baptist? The authorities weren't keen on people attracting crowds and so they arrested him. And his criticisms of King Herod's sex life got back to the palace, and Herod's wife got so wild about it that she asked for John's head on a plate. Nasty.

John the Baptist is famous for three things. Let's talk about each one and see what each might have to say to us today.

First, John called the people to repent. "Flee from the wrath to come" he cried.

He'd seen people coming to Temple for forgiveness, paying for doves and goats and spilling the blood of animals and the priests declaring forgiveness and nothing changing, people just doing the same things, living the same way. God wants true forgiveness, John realized, not just going through the motions. Repent! Turn around! Turn towards God ... with your hearts, with your minds, with how you live!

This passage from Luke is an example of the kinds of things John was on about – radical ethical living ... not just the outward appearance of hospitality and honesty but sacrificial hospitality to others, profound integrity and rejection of the whole corrupt system of kickbacks and self-gain.

How do you respond to someone asking you to change? I don't know about you but I'm not keen on it myself. 'I'm fine as I am thanks!' I tend to reply – I feel defensive. What right do you have to dare suggest that I'm wrong!? But, you know, sometimes God does sneak in through the cracks and I get confronted with a glimpse of myself that I'm not that proud of. I don't like seeing myself exhausted. I don't like seeing myself as bossy or arrogant. I don't like seeing myself as wrong or stupid. But I am all those things at times, and worse. And realizing that from time to time is a good thing. It is a call to repentance. It is a call to humility, an invitation to stop bad habits, to listen more to the people around me, to apologise, to try something new.

I wonder for you, how you might hear the Spirit's call to repent. What niggles at you? What do you feel guilty about? What do you wish you'd do differently?

I tend not to focus heavily on guilt and confession, but there is a vital place for that – not to make ourselves feel guilty for the sake of it, but to shove us out of stuckness, to invite us into new freedom ...

Hear again the voice of God saying 'Stop!' 'Turn around, you're going the wrong way!' Turn to Christ again and be set free.

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Second, John baptized people. Fascinating thing this. Ritual washing was an important part of Jewish practice. The more holy you could afford to be the more often you would wash – not just washing your hands and your feet, people did that often, but a full body bath was required for you to be spiritually clean. Baptism is different from that. Baptism only was needed once – you didn't need to keep being washed morning and night. John acted out the metaphor of God washing us clean from our sins, as Psalmist prays in Psalm 51:7

wash me and I shall be whiter than snow

& 10: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a right spirit within me

For John being baptized was a significant part of the repentance, turning to God, becoming a new person, becoming part of the true Israel, washed and available to God.

What significance do you give to your own baptism? For most of us we were baptized as babies. What does it mean to you to be baptized?

We know that Jesus Christ has taken away our sin on the cross. We know that God forgives us, that God has forgiven us even before we stuff things up ... but what helps you to really know that? How does that knowing get from here (head) to here (heart)? Water is a wonderful symbol. I invite you to think about this, when you're washing your hands or brushing your teeth ... let God show you more and more each day that you are forgiven that you are free. Let go your sin and shame and guilt. Let it wash away.

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Third, John looked forward. God had revealed to him that the Messiah was coming, coming soon. John pointed always ahead of himself – "Prepare the way of the Lord" he often quoted, from Isaiah 40. He's coming, the one who will baptize with fire!

"Are you the Messiah?" people asked him, and each time John would say "Nope, it's not me, but he's on his way. I'm just getting you ready for him. I'm the opening act, he's the real thing."

Surely that's just what we need to be doing, too. Pointing to Jesus. Easier said than done. I like getting the credit for things. I have far too much faith in my own cleverness and competence. Humility and repentance – that's the moments when we say, actually, I really don't deserve any credit, it's all God's doing. It is brilliant that God needs us and works through us, but it's all him. Without Jesus we're nothing much at all, Without him we're just rats in a cage going around and around in circles. Without him we're just racing off the broken bridge over the cliff into destruction – we're just train wrecks in our own power.

John reminds us to always point beyond ourselves, to Jesus.

to claim our own voice and live strongly out of our own convictions, but to know that our best is Christ in us and our worst is already forgiven in the great love of the Father.