

## THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Isaiah 40: 1-11  
Mark 1: 1-8

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” That’s the way the 1970’s musical “Godspell” opens. In the film version, you may remember David Haskell, playing the John figure, singing this phrase as he crosses the Brooklyn Bridge, on his way to baptize the clown-faced Jesus in a fountain in Central Park.<sup>i</sup> So also does the gospel of Mark begin. Within four verses of the first chapter we’ve learned that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” There’s no story about Jesus’ birth at the beginning of Mark, nor anywhere in the gospel. No, instead we get to hear about who John was, and then in the ninth verse about how he baptized the fully grown Jesus of Nazareth in the Jordan River.

This is the second Sunday of Advent. In the Christian calendar, Advent is the one month of preparatory time before the holiday that commemorates Jesus’ birth.<sup>ii</sup> But our lectionary this week presents a gospel lesson<sup>iii</sup> about an adult who is then Jesus’ contemporary in his thirties. John the Baptist is a popular religious figure who’s attracting people from the whole Judean countryside and even from the great holy city of Jerusalem. He proclaims that one more powerful than he will soon be coming on the public scene – one for whom John is not even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals. But, who exactly is this great religious leader, John the Baptist, himself – a person written about in all four gospels, in the book of Acts, in the writings of the Roman

historian Josephus, and even in the Holy Qur'an?<sup>iv</sup> What was his message, and what power does it have for us today?

This morning's gospel lesson explains that "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>v</sup> But being immersed in the Jordan River is not enough to wipe people's sins away. In Luke's account it becomes clear for John that there are other things that people must do to avoid God's judgment, for "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."<sup>vi</sup> Here are the specifics that John prescribes: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."<sup>vii</sup> Tax collectors must not demand any more than the exact amount owed,<sup>viii</sup> and soldiers must be satisfied with their wages, never extorting money from anyone by threats or false accusation.<sup>ix</sup> John is also specifically concerned for the well-being of the poor.<sup>x</sup> And he's a prophet who's not afraid to expose the moral improprieties of the political leaders of his day, even at the risk of his own death. In fact, John is ultimately executed by King Herod after John tells him that he's acted illegally in marrying his brother's wife.<sup>xi</sup>

Some of this biblical account is externally confirmed by the Roman historian Josephus in his work on *Jewish Antiquities*, appearing sometime between 80-95 A.D.<sup>xii</sup> Josephus writes that "Herod killed him, although he [John the Baptist] was a good man and urged the Jews to practice virtue and justice toward one another and piety toward God, doing so to come together in baptism...not used to gain pardon for some sins but rather for purification of the body, seeing that the soul had already been cleansed before by justice."<sup>xiii</sup>

John developed his own following of disciples and adherents, both contemporaneously -- some of whom visited Jesus on John's behalf when John was imprisoned<sup>xiv</sup> – and apparently right on down to the present time. The Man dae'ans, who live primarily in Iraq and Iran now, consider John the Baptist as the last and greatest of the prophets and don't recognize Jesus as a prophet himself.<sup>xv</sup> It seems from the biblical record that Jesus at first was himself a disciple of John the Baptist, only later separating from John's movement to begin a ministry of his own.<sup>xvi</sup> Jesus clearly considered John to be a great religious figure. Not only was he baptized by John, but also Jesus is reported by Luke to have said, "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John."<sup>xvii</sup>

How can we take courage from the example of John to challenge ourselves, as well as our current political leaders and government functionaries, in the name of morality and justice? I'd like briefly to discuss two issues in America today which seem egregiously to violate the message of John the Baptist. The first is the way some of our highest public officials are trying to silence critics of the costly war that we began in Iraq almost three years ago, impugning the critics' patriotism and undermining their freedom of speech. The second is the massive governmental transfer of wealth from the poor and the working class in America to the wealthy and the very wealthy.

On November 17, John Murtha, a seventy-three year old Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania – a Vietnam Veteran, thirty-seven year Marine and recipient of the Bronze Star and two purple hearts – denounced the Iraq war as a "flawed policy wrapped in an illusion," and called for a pull-out of American troops, who would be redeployed as a quick reaction force in the region. In response, Republican congresswoman Jean

Schmidt took the floor of the House of Representatives to say that she had just received a call from a Marine reserve colonel who asked her “to send Congressman Murtha a message: that cowards cut and run, Marines never do.” Meanwhile, the White House press office accused Murtha of advocating “surrender to the terrorists,”<sup>xviii</sup> President Bush declared that “Democrats and antiwar critics” were undermining the troops. Vice-President Cheney labeled those who claimed his administration had distorted information to get us into the war in the first place as “dishonest and reprehensible...corrupt and shameless.”<sup>xix</sup>

I am deeply discouraged to see here the same behavior that I remember from President Lyndon Johnson’s administration during the Vietnam War: Start by calling critics cowards, question their patriotism, claim they are undermining our troops and giving comfort to the enemy, and then finish off by calling them names like reprehensible and shameless. There’s a movie out now, *Good Night and Good Luck*,” about CBS commentator Edward H. Murrow’s courage in the 1950’s in challenging Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, when freedom of speech, association and the press were under attack in that era.<sup>xx</sup> These are dark and sorry days for a democracy, in three generations now, when its government attempts to choke off public debate and the constitutional rights of its citizens in the name of dangers to the state. May we stand in the prophetic tradition of John the Baptist and challenge political authority directly when it acts immorally or in derogation of the fundamental values, enshrined in its founding documents, which have held this nation together for more than two hundred years.

Secondly, the prophet John the Baptist, who exposed moral improprieties of the king in his day, and lost his life for it, also spoke out vigorously on behalf of the poor: Each of us must share food and clothing with those who need it. Moreover, we must not misuse our public positions – say as tax collector or soldier – to demand or extort anything beyond what is legally our due. We are now at a very strange time in our nation’s history, when we have been cutting back dramatically on social services for the poor over the last 25 years, at the same time as we have been cutting taxes in a way that radically favors the rich. The number of Americans living in poverty has been steadily rising to 12.5% of our population overall and 17.6% of children under the age of eighteen, according to the U.S. Census Bureau as of two years ago. The number of people without health insurance has also been rising to over 45 million, or about 15.6% of the nation’s population. And a significant number of people living in poverty are hardworking people, not just the disabled or unemployed.<sup>xxi</sup>

On the other hand, the principal way our government has responded to recession has been through an economic stimulation program based on tax cuts. In the first year of the tax cuts under the current administration, for the bottom 60% of Americans, the average tax cut was just over \$300. The average for those making over \$1 million was not \$300, but some \$112,000.<sup>xxii</sup> By the year 2010, when the cuts are fully in place, 52% of the total cuts will go to the richest one percent of Americans, whose average annual income will be then be \$1.5 million. That is, of the \$234 billion in tax cuts scheduled for that year, \$121 billion will go to just 1.4 million taxpayers.<sup>xxiii</sup> The current administration also wants to eliminate all estate taxes; doing this will benefit the rich almost exclusively.<sup>xxiv</sup> As a matter of public policy, this seems like a massive

transfer of potential government funds to the rich, in the name of stimulating the economy and providing a trickle-down effect for the poor. In the prophetic tradition of John the Baptist, we should be deeply ashamed of ourselves.

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” In this Advent season, we assume that John the Baptist was preparing the way for Jesus as Lord. And indeed he may have been. But the biblical evidence is not quite as clear as we might like it. For when John is imprisoned by Herod at the end of his life, he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”<sup>xxv</sup> Jesus tells John’s disciples to go tell him that with Jesus “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”<sup>xxvi</sup> We don’t learn whether or not that’s conclusive evidence for John that Jesus is in fact the one who is to come. There are some biblical commentators who claim that John actually saw himself as the forerunner not of Jesus, but of the prophet Elijah,<sup>xxvii</sup> who had been prophesied in the Hebrew Bible to come again before God’s judgment day.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In any case, John calls us to a robust prophetic perspective, challenging the principalities and powers of the day in the name of justice and actively repenting of our own sinful ways. May we be forgiven our foolish ways, and may we be re clothed in our rightful mind. May we, in purer lives, God’s service find.<sup>xxix</sup> AMEN.

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- <sup>i</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1994), p. 97.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 8.
- <sup>iii</sup> Mark 1:1-8.
- <sup>iv</sup> Catherine M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 3.
- <sup>v</sup> Mark 1:4.
- <sup>vi</sup> Luke 3:9.
- <sup>vii</sup> Luke 3:11.
- <sup>viii</sup> Luke 3:13.
- <sup>ix</sup> Luke 3:14.
- <sup>x</sup> Notice the reply when John has been imprisoned and he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus responds about his healing practices but also explains that “the poor have good news brought to them.” See Matthew 11: 1-6 and Luke 7: 18-23.
- <sup>xi</sup> Matthew 6:3-11 and Mark 6: 17-28.
- <sup>xii</sup> Tatum, *John the Baptist*, p. 96.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* as quoted in Murphy, *John the Baptist*, p. 5.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Matthew 11: 1-6 and Luke 7: 18-23
- <sup>xv</sup> “John the Baptist,” *Wikipedia* (online encyclopedika at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_the\\_Baptist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist)).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Tatum, *John the Baptist*, p. 22.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Luke 7:28.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, “Comment: Floor War,” *The New Yorker* (December 5, 2005), p. 35.
- <sup>xix</sup> Frank Rich, “Dishonest, Reprehensible, Corrupt...,” *New York Times*, November 27, 2005, p. 11.
- <sup>xx</sup> Steve Vineberg, “Indecent Exposure,” *Christian Century*, November 15, 2005.
- <sup>xxi</sup> As cited in Daniel B. Clendenin, “Portfolio Performance,” [The Journey with Jesus](http://www.journeywithjesus.net) (Palo Alto, CA: September 13, 2004), [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)
- <sup>xxii</sup> . “The Bush Tax Cut,” (Dean for America, 2003), [www.bushtax.com](http://www.bushtax.com)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> . Citizens for Tax Justice, “Year-by-Year Analysis of the Bush Tax Cuts...,” (June 12, 2002), [www.ctj.org/html/gwb0602.htm](http://www.ctj.org/html/gwb0602.htm)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> . “The President’s Agenda for Tax Relief” (The White House web page), [www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/taxplan.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/taxplan.html)
- <sup>xxv</sup> Matthew 11: 3; Luke 7:20.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Luke 7: 22-23; Matthew 11: 5-6
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Shimon Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist* (London: Century, 2004), p. 143.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> See, for example, Malachi 3:1, 4:5.

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xxix xxix John Greenleaf Whittier, “Dear Mother-Father of Us All,” in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #274.