



“U-TURNS ALLOWED”
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-18

All four gospels introduce us to that colorful and confrontational prophet called John the Baptizer. As event has taken place that radically changes the way we look at and experience the world – and they describe it in very vivid and powerful ways.¹

Dr. William H. Willimon is one of our most famous and distinguished United Methodist bishops. He served the historic Duke Chapel before his election to the episcopacy. He has written over 40 books – and was named one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English speaking world. He has an impressive resume.

He has been introduced with glowing comments on many occasions. He recently shared that the best introduction he ever received was short and not-so-sweet. It was a dear friend – a member of his local church. It went as follows: “The man we are about to hear has ruined many of our family’s lunches with what he said in his sermons. I now give to you one of the most annoying and difficult pastors to listen to on a regular basis. He is my pastor and nemesis, who insists on telling the truth without regard to my feelings. Pastor Will.”²

It is my responsibility to introduce to you today one of the most annoying, challenging figures in biblical literature – John the Baptist. He has ruined more Christmas seasons than anybody I know. Before you can kneel in Bethlehem you must pass through the desert and meet him. Let’s dig in.

We know from **Matthew 11:14** that John the Baptizer stands in the prophetic tradition of Isaiah and Elijah. Those credentials were well-known to the Jewish establishment. We further know from Luke’s gospel that John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both of his parents were of the priestly lineage of Israel.³

Elizabeth was further related to Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁴ We further know that John’s birth – while not a virgin birth – was a special birth.⁵ It is further revealed to Zechariah that his son John would be a mighty prophet.⁶ Yes, John has all the right credentials and bloodlines. He was an insider. However, all the gospel writers make it quite clear that John’s authority and power do not derive from his family pedigree – but from God.⁷ John was fully immersed in the culture and politics of his day – but not shaped by them. His identity is shaped by God. John the Baptist is the same man in the silence of the desert and when the spotlight comes upon him.⁸

Now let us turn to our Old Testament lesson. In **Malachi 3:1-4** we read of the messenger who will come to clear the way for the Master they have been promised and are looking for. That is why “God coming to us is both a delight and quite difficult. It is a delight because the savior comes to us; it is difficult because he comes to us in order to cleanse.”⁹ (Ugh)

Notice how the prophet Malachi uses the imagery of the strongest of soaps. With this soap he scrubs us like dirty laundry. Washing us! Rinsing us! Wringing us out! Then he repeats the cycle – over and over and over again – until we’re clean.”¹⁰ Somebody cries out in **verse 2** “Who can survive his coming?” There is only one correct answer – the one who submits to the soap – and the suds and the scrubbing. I need a bath! I need a bath!

So in **verse 7** we see they came to the River Jordan to be baptized. However, John knows it will take more than a splash of the muddy Jordan River on their bodies to create in them a new heart and spirit.¹¹ It was a beginning – not the end.

Notice that John continues on and thunders the message, “Change your life! God’s kingdom is near.” So John begins with a great big altar call – right there at the River Jordan. He basically says, ‘Turn or burn.’ (Ouch). This is a tough pill to swallow.

Yes, they and we must come to the Jordan River where – once as a people – we crossed over to the Promised Land. John the Baptist levels the playing field for us all. Nobody receives favoritism – nobody receives a get-out-of-jail-free card.

I passed a church sign this week that shared this message: God does not care where you have been.” True enough. However, God does care where we are going. We need a spiritual U-turn or a new direction so to speak. Anybody can come to the Jordan River. It’s what you commit to when you leave. The tougher work of discipleship and spiritual formation must follow. This is what is lacking today. The crooked roads shall become straight – the rough way made smooth. Later on in John’s gospel it becomes even clearer: **You must be born again.**”

I remember being so lost once on Interstate 80 – that I made a U-turn at one of those places where you aren’t supposed to make a u-turn. It was the best decision I made that day. I was on my way to do a graveside service. I had my cleric collar on – and my robe in the back. I had my explanation already to give to the state trooper. It is not easy to admit you are lost – but it is necessary. When we deny our sinfulness – we delay our spiritual growth – our ability to repent - to begin again - our relationship with God’s. Our relationship with God is not based on our race or class – but on a heart turned consciously to seek what only God can give – which is the forgiveness of sins – our broken relationship with God. Yes, the door cannot be opened unless we knock. We can’t find unless we first seek.

After my John the Baptist sermon last year, someone asked why they had come. I believe they came because they were weary of wandering and longed to be at peace

with God. John the Baptist caused them to take stock of what really was in their hearts. We are prone to fickleness and bad influences in our lives. Our list of what is important in our lives is radically different from God's.

We notice in **verses 11-15** what a diverse crowd John gathers. He attracts soldiers of the Roman Empire, tax collectors, Pharisees, common laborers and the list goes on. They even ask in **verse 10**, "What shall we do then?" Notice how incredibly specific John gets. He brings the faith into everyday life. So much of spirituality today is vague – but the way that John the Baptist reveals is specific.

Now John the Baptist is a credible witness – because he is not asking you to do anything that he has not done himself. We know from **Luke 1:80** that at some point in his life – he himself went to the desert. John's ministry was developed in the stark desert countryside of Judea (the wilderness) and not in the Holy City or at the National Cathedral or the Temple courts. He had to remove himself from the establishment – in order to speak to it – and correct it. This is one of the most difficult tasks for Pastor Ray and myself. We have to speak a challenging word to the very people we love – and who are to love us.

Yes, there in the desert God could purge from his heart and soul all that would hinder him from the mission that God has for him to fulfill. In the desert he can be disciplined and trained by the Spirit for the expectations that God has of him – and not the culture around. Here John could cultivate a godly life.

Like John – we live in a fallen world where the world constantly puts before us the wrong appetites – thoughts – and desires. Left to ourselves – we just dig the hole deeper and deeper. John the Baptist tells us of our need for repentance, not to rub it in, but to tell of a Savior who came to rub it out.

So on this second Sunday of Advent - we find ourselves back in the wilderness to listen to John's thunder. The first thing that St. Luke – the historian and physician – does in **verse 1** is to introduce an emperor, four governors, and two prominent members of the religious establishment. These are the people of power, position, and prestige. However – the word of God comes to John – and not to them. It is John who will reveal the historic event that will change the world – Jesus Christ.

It is John who issues the clarion call to get spiritually healthy – to produce a fit nation. It will take more than bread. A new diet is called for – 'a word alone' diet. This is the diet that sustains John and the One he introduces – Jesus the Christ – the Messiah.

So John declares that you and I must change the direction of our lives. A great big spiritual u-turn is necessary to find the Jesus way. I know there is a lot of psycho-babble out in the world telling us "I'm okay – your okay." Watch the Evening News (I watch NBC) for just one week – and see if we need a new direction – a new horizon – a greater way. We are not okay. We need a savior.

Perhaps some of you have seen the sign, “God is my co-pilot.” Someone however issued this correction: “If God is your co-pilot, change your seat.” That is exactly what John is sharing in our lesson today.

I said to Pastor Ray this week “If you are here next December – you are getting the John the Baptist sermon to preach.”

I know by now that some of you want to check yourself out of this sermon. I wanted to check out in my study and preparation. Why all this talk about repentance and taking a u-turn? The answer is simple. The Bible demands it. “You shall call his name Jesus – for He will save his people from their sins.”¹²

John Wesley was correct when in one of his finest sermons he shared our conversion is constant. It is an ongoing reality of yielding and surrendering our lives to the Jesus way and truth to produce the Jesus life. There should be a sign on every bathroom mirror sharing, ‘Caution: Work in progress. Under God’s construction.’

Pastor Ray and I often wince when we hear someone from the 10:30 a.m. service criticize the worship life and style of those at the 8:30 a.m. service. We also wince when we hear someone at the 8:30 a.m. service speak unkindly about the worship at the 10:30 a.m. service. Such behavior is not fruitful. It is detrimental to the fabric of this community of faith – and your own faith. Jesus – in **John 4:23-24** – made it quite clear, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”

So don’t check out of this sermon. It is a sermon for us all. If you are annoyed or disturbed – then this sermon has been a success.

Yes, John the Baptist comes to announce the ‘Christ’ as the messianic expectation of Israel. However, he must rearrange the expectations they had.

Yes, the Messiah would come – but not in all the ways people expected the Messiah.¹³ Instead of a sword – he came with a bar of soap for all.

Last year, I asked you to reflect upon a question. I will ask you to do it again: ‘Why celebrate a savior’s birth unless we need saving?’ It is not easy to confront the truth about ourselves – but Jesus did say, “The truth shall set you free.”¹⁴

Recently I shared with my Sunday School class that if something is missing in your life – it’s not because you need anymore of Christ – but Christ needs more of you. In the Christian life it’s not how much you know – but who you know. John says, “You need to know Christ.” Jesus did not say “Know all about me.” He goes deeper: “But follow me.” The Jesus truth must become a way and then life itself.

In front of us today are the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. Here we join ourselves to the One who is the way – the truth – the life. Let us receive as a gift – what God knows we truly need – God.

Let us go to the Holy Table!

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
December 6, 2009 – preached at both services.
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1542.

² **“Pulpit Resource,”** volume 37, No. 4, October-December, 2009 edition, page 44.

³ Luke 1:5.

⁴ Luke 1:36.

⁵ Luke 1:13.

⁶ Luke 1:76.

⁷ David E. Garland, **“MARK: The NIV Application Commentary,”** Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, page 55.

⁸ I am indebted to Eugene Peterson for these words found in **THE JESUS WAY**, pages 104 and 108 when he talks about the prophet Elijah.

⁹ Op. cit, Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1476.

¹⁰ Ibid, Peterson, page 1476.

¹¹ Op. cit, Garland, **MARK**, page 11.

¹² Matthew 1:21.

¹³ Op. cit, Willimon, **Pulpit Resource**, page 44.

¹⁴ John 8:32.