



I WANNA GET WASHED!
Malachi 3:1-4, Mark 1:1-8
December 7, 2008

On May 17, 1971 – the musical **Godspell** opened on Broadway. **Godspell** is an archaic spelling of the word ‘gospel.’ The play begins with an actor coming on stage with a bucket and sponge and shouting the words “**I wanna get washed – I wanna get washed!**” The musical featured selections that I still love to this day: “**Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord,**” “**Save the People**” and “**Day By Day.**” Those words and actions come directly from our lessons today.

As you listen to the words from Mark’s gospel – you see “that Mark wasted no time in getting to business. There is a single sentence introduction. An event has taken place that radically changes the way we look at – and experience – the world – and he can’t wait to tell us about it.”¹

To prepare the way for this great event one has been sent to do exactly that. In our lesson today we are introduced to John the Baptist.

For John the Baptizer – who preceded Jesus and in whose footsteps Jesus continued – there was no such thing as secular history. None. Everything that happened – happened in a world penetrated by God.² Yes, the prophets contend that everything – absolutely everything – takes place on sacred ground. God has something to say about every aspect of our lives.³ The prophets make it impossible to evade God or make detours around God. Prophets insist on receiving God into every nook and cranny of life. That is why prophets like John the Baptist are hard to take – and easy to dismiss.⁴ Now you know why these lessons are repeated every year.

John the Baptist causes us to realize our personal need of a savior – our need to be washed. Yes, before we reach the manger we must pass through the desert where John the Baptist is preaching.⁵

As we open our lesson today we see that John the Baptist has burst upon the scene creating new excitement and stirring hearts.⁶

We know from **verse 5** it shares “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.” The popularity of John is strong evidence that he had awakened a hunger among the people of Jesus’ day for a way of life that was marked by moral clarity and decisive action. They were ready for a way of life before

God that made life large and deep – filled with purpose – even if it required fire⁷ and a confession – “I wanna get washed! I wanna get washed!” We see that hunger and thirst in America today and around the world.

We know from **Matthew 11:14** that John the Baptizer stands in the prophetic traditions 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.⁸ Elizabeth was further related to Mary – the mother of Jesus.⁹ We further know that John’s birth – while not a virgin birth – was a special birth.¹⁰ It is further revealed to Zechariah that his John would be a mighty prophet.¹¹ We included that in our liturgy today – it is called the Benedictus or Zechariah’s Song. Yes, John has all the right background and bloodline. However, Mark doesn’t mention a word of it. Mark wants to make it perfectly clear that John’s authority and power do not derive from his family pedigree – but from God.¹²

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.”¹³ (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.¹⁴ Somebody cries out in **verse two** “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 wanna get washed! I wanna get washed!

So in **verse 5** 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.¹⁵ 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).

To call all of Israel to baptism and cleansing was a tough pill to swallow. This was reserved for Gentiles (the dogs) and others who were defiled. They must all come to the Jordan River where they once as a people crossed over to the Promised Land. John the Baptist levels the playing field for us all. Nobody gets a get-out-of-jail-free card. This is why we preach and teach that the ground at the cross is level for everyone. I know some churches preach that God loves you ‘exactly as you are.’

That is true. It is the first step. However, God loves us so much that he won’t let us stay exactly as we are. That’s what is missing in so many sermons today. The tough work of discipleship and sanctification is required to make the crooked places

straight. I love the words of the country preacher, “O God – I ain’t what I ought to be, and I ain’t what I’m gonna be – but thanks to you – I ain’t what I used to be.”

I know it is very threatening to hear ‘I must change’ – ‘I must repent’ – when you and I think we have it spiritually all together. Repentance and godly sorrow is for those other people – not me. John wants us to separate us from the lies and illusions we have become accustomed to in order to begin again. We must be born again.

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 of Jerusalem or the Temple courts. He had to remove himself from the establishment – in order to speak to it – and correct it.

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.

While our culture is called by sociologists ‘post-modernism’ - a belief that there is no absolute truth – John the Baptist still thunders **“repent and believe the gospel.”**

When you come to the desert and the River Jordan – you better know the expectation – the response being called for. As we know from John’s dress code – his focus is not on the outward appearance but on the interior – the heart and soul. This is not a trip to the beauty parlor – or a spiritual drive-in religious high. This is a place of serious self-examination in order that the Spirit can invade our lives and have a fresh encounter with the living God.

So, John’s declares that you and I must change the direction of our lives. The new direction is repentance – a great big spiritual U-turn. I wanna be washed! I wanna be washed! I know that many of you have flown by airplane to Orlando, Florida, to get to Disney World. Let’s say you are on a plane scheduled to fly from Philadelphia to Orlando. You have your seat belt on. Ready to go! The pilot comes on and shares, “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to our flight – 456, non-stop to Orlando. Our cruising altitude will be 35,000 feet. I have the benefit of many navigational tools and radar to get us there – but I won’t be using any of them today. These tools are too narrow and confining to my superior knowledge. Don’t worry folks – all roads lead to Orlando. I want to further share that I am a very sincere pilot. Sit back and relax.” You would be outraged – and so would I. Well – that is exactly how our world lives in relationship to God. We think we are self-reliant and not in need of God’s

direction and guidance. Just a look at the Nightly News and the morning headlines reveals a different picture however. We need help – a new direction – a new horizon.

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 know by now that some of you want to check yourselves out of this sermon. **Why is Pastor Eric ruining the joy of the season?** Why all this talk about repentance and the need to be washed and cleansed? The answer is simple. The Bible demands it: “You shall call his name Jesus – for He will save his people from their sins.”¹⁶ “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”¹⁷

The one question I want you to write down and ponder today is this – Why celebrate a savior’s birth unless we need saving? It is not easy to confront the truth about ourselves – but Jesus did say that “the truth shall set you free.”¹⁸

The Good News that John the Baptist has to offer – and for us to discover – is while we are sinners – sinners are not all we can be. God offers us a new direction – a new life – a new right standing before God. John awakens in us that pull and tug upon our lives for a vital relationship with God. John awakens that thirst and hunger for God. He shares with us that one is coming whose truth – way – and life are all part of one seamless robe of being. Follow Him. People in every age have been awakened to the call of the deep – the call of God.

In front of us today is the Bread of life – the Cup of salvation. Here we see the One who is the way – the truth – and the life. Here we see the One who – like John – cultivated the godly life. Here we are given strength for the journey – to love and serve as he did. God sent his son to us to give us new beginnings and fresh possibilities and eternal life and hope. Let us receive as a gift what God knows we need.

Let us go to the Holy Table.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

December 7, 2008 – preached at both the 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. services

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with it’s translator,** NavPress: Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1542.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES,** Wm. B. Eerdman’s Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, page 138.

³ Op. cit. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS,** page 1027.

⁴ Op. cit. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1027.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, [et. al.], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR B,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1993, first edition, page 13.

⁶ Ibid, Craddock, page 12.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pages 238-239.

⁸ Luke 1:5.

⁹ Luke 1:36.

¹⁰ Luke 1:13.

¹¹ Luke 1:76.

¹² David E. Garland, **“MARK: The NIV Application Commentary,”** Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, page 55.

¹³ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1476.

¹⁴ Peterson, *ibid*, 1476.

¹⁵ Garland, **MARK**, page 45.

¹⁶ Matthew 1:21.

¹⁷ Luke 2:11.

¹⁸ John 8:32.