

013 How Can We Prepare for God to Move in Our Midst?

Matthew 3:1-10; Mark 1:1-6; Luke 3:1-14; John 1:6-8

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 3/18/18

INTRODUCTION April 13, 1970 at 10:07 p.m. (EST) NASA had become so good at launching flawless missions to the moon that the country had stopped paying attention. - Apollo 13 flight was 2 days, 7 hours, and 54 minutes into routine flight - 203,980 miles out. Suddenly the words of astronaut Jack Swigert crackled over the speakers at Mission Control:

"OK, Houston, we've had a problem here."

In disbelief, hoping they'd misheard, the controllers radioed back, *"this is Houston. Say again please."*

Jim Lovell then spoke, confirming the worst: *"Houston, we've had a problem."*

Those five words arrested our nation. Suddenly everyone came to full alert as everyone realized that the spacecraft had malfunctioned, and the three astronauts were in grave peril.

As the world watched and prayed, NASA raced to find a solution. Engineers soon realized there was only enough power to get the astronauts part of the way home. Officials were predicting that this would be the worst disaster NASA had ever experienced.

Flight director Gene Kranz refused to accept that outcome as an option. Working with unprecedented determination and focus, NASA did the impossible. It rescued the astronauts from certain death in outer space.

Desert Hot Springs, we too have a problem – we are rushing towards certain death. We need the intervention of someone outside ourselves to come up with a solution and save us!

That is just what Jesus did – he intervened in our world and rescued us that we might continue to have life – and not just any life, but eternal life!

Here at Grace Church we are in a series called "It's All About Jesus" (thank you Ellie Dzuro for the suggestion of the title). This is the thirteenth message in that series. Have looked at the

stories surrounding Jesus' conception and birth, his early years. Today we pick up the story of his adult ministry.

This *"beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"* as Mark puts it in the first verse of his gospel, actually begins with another person – John the Baptist.

Recap story of the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple some thirty years earlier. Gabriel had told him he was to name his son John, which means *"Jehovah is gracious."* He told him his son would be *"a joy and delight"* and then proclaimed six things about this son that was to be born.¹

1. He would be great in the sight of the Lord.
2. He would be a Nazirite from birth. The Nazirite vow, described in Numbers 6:2-8, was a vow a person (male or female) would take for a certain period of time. During that time they would separate themselves unto the Lord, abstain from wine or strong drink, and let their hair grow until the time of their vow was completed. Only two other men in biblical history were appointed to be Nazirites from birth: Samson (who broke his vow), and Samuel who was faithful to his. John is the third and last person called to be a Nazirite from birth.
3. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. (Better than the NIV translation *"from birth"* – remember how he leapt in Elizabeth's womb when Mary came to visit). "Filled" means he would be "controlled" by the Spirit.
4. John would begin a repentance movement bringing many back to the Lord. The purpose was to have a group ready to accept the Messiah once he was identified.
5. He would go before the Lord in the Spirit of Elijah. Rabbinic Judaism taught that following the death of Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel. However, from Malachi 3:22-24 the rabbis derived the hope that God's prophetic voice would return at the end of days with Elijah. You will remember that Elijah was the prophet who didn't die, but ascended to heaven in a whirlwind. Gabriel didn't say John

¹ Luke 1:14-17

would be Elijah, but that he would come *in the spirit and power of Elijah*.

6. Gabriel's final proclamation was about the purpose of John's ministry. John's special calling was to be the forerunner, a herald preparing people for the coming of the King. The preparation was spiritual, consisting of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. John's role was to prepare the hearts of people to accept Jesus once he was identified.

For our text we will be using a harmony of the gospels.² (Thanks to Heidi Houston for typing it up for us to use).

Follow along in your handout in the bulletin, reading the first four paragraphs:

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way³ – "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation."

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias Tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the desert.

This was the means God used to call John into his prophetic ministry. The last prophet was Malachi, and according to rabbinic theology the next prophet would be Elijah, who would announce when the Messiah will come. Two Old Testament prophets predicted a forerunner to the Messiah: Malachi and Isaiah, both of whom Mark quotes.

Notice that it doesn't say that the word of God came to the "celebrities" and "important people," the "biggies" of the day.

² **Luke 1:80; Mark 1:1-6; Luke 3:1-14; Matthew 3:1-10; John 1:6-8**

³ This first part of Mark's quotation is from **Malachi 3:1**

Doesn't speak in Emperor's palace in Rome, or temple of Jerusalem or court of Herod.

Important to recognize that God is not always speaking to the people or in the places that the world might consider to be significant.

History knows little about Annas and Caiaphas and Herod and Pontius Pilate other than the role they had in life of Jesus. Yet in their day, you would have thought these were the people worth following and listening to.

Luke is saying, here are the big men in their big places doing their big things. And in the midst of all the things that the world thought to be important, that the world was admiring –at the very same time – God goes out instead to the wilderness and speaks to a nondescript, rather eccentric looking person who has no pulpit, no pews, no stage lighting, no P.A. system - not even a building.

It comes to a man whose diet no one would want to follow, and whose wardrobe is certainly not the best, As Frederick Buechner said, "*he wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't have handled.*"ⁱ

How he looked not as important as what he had to say. [People will overlook a lot if you have something to say worth listening to]. Crowds traveled hot and dusty trip, 20 miles from Jerusalem, descent of 4,000 feet in elevation.

- Not a crowd pleaser
 - Not an
 - "*if it feels good do it*" sort of preacher;
 - *whatever you think, however you want to live;*
 - "*many paths to God. It doesn't matter which one you're on as long as you're sincere.*"
 - *Not a good old pat you on the back good old boy; or keep 'em laughing* sort of preacher.
 - More like Peter Marshall, who reportedly ended one sermon like this: "*If God be you're your God, then follow Him. If not, then go to hell!*"

John's Message (fourth paragraph): *He went into all the country around the Jordan, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

The expression “*baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*” must be taken as a whole. The baptism that John proclaimed and was administering was connected with repentance, and resulted in remission of sins.

Let’s unpack it and look at key words and phrases.

1. Repentance - not basically a religious word - . Comes from a culture of nomadic people, living in a world with no maps or road signs. Easy to get lost in the desert. Become aware that the countryside is strange, and finally say to yourself: “*I’m going in the wrong direction!*”

One of the most humbling experiences of my life was when I was a senior – joined the basketball team in Kansas. My very first time in the game I got the ball and took off for the goal. Only problem, I was rushing towards wrong goal “*STOP! YOU’RE GOING THE WRONG WAY!*” my teammates shouted at me.

The first step in repentance is confession of sin – admitting to yourself and your companions that you’ve been headed the wrong direction!

Common people didn’t have a problem getting it. Ones who had a problem were the Jews at the top of the social ladder. “Repentance” was a word they used when talking to Gentiles. Their attitude towards them was “*You’ve got to change your loyalties, your way of life, the things you’re proud of, the value’s you’ve had. You’ve got to become like one of us.*”

So it was very humbling for a well-respected Jew to come forward, submit himself to baptism, and say, “*I need what the pagan Gentiles need.*”

2. Baptism (second key word)

This repentance, change of direction, is affirmed in baptism.

1. In first century proselyte baptism - not just circumcision, required by converts from non-Jewish background. Every Gentile was considered “unclean” or “defiled” by Jews, and so they required a “cleansing.”
2. Baptism symbolizes more than physical cleansing. Baptism is a sign of spiritual cleansing. Zechariah 13:1 talks of Messianic fountain which will cleanse from sin and uncleanness. Ezekiel 36: 25 ff – God will sprinkle water on you and you will be

clean from your uncleanness and receive a *new heart* and a *new spirit*.

3. Baptism was for those who repented. Conviction of hearts about sinfulness – had to blurt it out, had to say something about their sin. That’s what they did in baptism.
4. Those being baptized dedicated themselves to a changed life in expectation of a Greater One who would establish the Kingdom of God! In their baptism they were making a commitment to accept whoever John identified as the Messiah.

3. Third key phrase is *forgiveness (remission) of sins*.

Remission (*aphesis*, derived from *aphiemi*) means “*sending away.*”

The sins are taken from the sinner and are

- sent as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:13),
- they are like writing that has been blotted out (Isaiah 43:25),
- they are cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

Notice that what is sent away is *sins* – plural. They are innumerable, heaped up like a mountain.

Can’t separate sin from its result, which is guilt. And being guilty means you deserve punishment!

But when your sins are taken away, all the guilt and all the punishment is taken away as well! Glorious, blessed comfort and hope! In words of chorus:

*Gone, gone, gone, gone all my sins are gone
Now my soul is free and in my heart’s a song
Buried in the deepest sea,
Yes, that’s good enough for me
I shall live eternally,
Praise God my sins are G.O.N.E. gone!*

He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light he came only as a witness to the light. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

John the Baptist had no illusions of self-importance. The last thing John wanted was for people to look to him. He was aware that he was NOT the light.

Instead he was satisfied to be a “voice.” You can’t see a voice. You can only hear it.

John wasn’t interested in drawing attention to himself but disappearing, being “invisible” as much as possible.

John’s sole concern was that people would follow Jesus.⁴ He understood his role as strictly being the forerunner of the Messiah. He wanted men to forget him, and only see the one whom he came to announce.

This should be true of all of us. If we are going to be effective witnesses for our Lord, we must forget ourselves. Our likes, our dislikes, our needs, our personal interests, our ambitions – none of them are important.

People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

He preached repentance and baptized people for at least six months before he declared Jesus to be the Messiah. So a great number of people were baptized by him and returned home to where they lived, including a large number from outside the country.⁵

His ministry caught the attention of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, who were concerned about anyone with messianic aspirations – it could lead to political unrest, maybe even insurrection, with swift and savage retaliation by the Roman overlords.

The investigative team members they sent down weren’t coming to be baptized, but to first observe him, and later - on a return trip - interrogate him concerning his identity and his activities.

⁴ This is something we must all remember as we attempt to witness for our Lord. It’s not about us. Anytime we start to think there is something important about ourselves, we lose our effectiveness. The reason for our witness is Jesus, the focus of our witness must be Jesus.

⁵ Decades later (Acts 19:1-7) Paul ran into a group of Jews who had been baptized by John, but had never heard who the Messiah was because they lived outside the land. Paul had to tell them that it was Jesus of Nazareth. In accordance to their baptismal commitment to John, these then accepted Jesus as Messiah and were baptized again into believer’s baptism.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax 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.

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

Confession, admitting wrong, is the first step in repentance. Second step is taking an alternate direction.

People asked, “what shall we do?” They understood that genuine repentance is evidenced in “fruit”. (Plural in Greek) More than just being “sorry,” feeling “bad in your heart.”

A real change of mind and attitude will show itself in a change of behavior. And so they ask, “How does my repentance affect my situation, my occupation? What’s expected of me?”

- Answer wasn’t penitential. Not told to do “penance,”
- Answer wasn’t ceremonial. Didn’t say that the act of baptism itself was the “fruit”
- Answer wasn’t devotional. Not told to “pray and memorize Scripture.”
- Answer wasn’t ancestral. Jews thought they “had it in the bag” because they were descendants of Abraham, and therefore guaranteed God’s blessings, no matter what they believed or how they acted. John is clear: being descendants of Abraham is no protection from judgment. Instead, practical. John points to their jobs and personal relationships.
- To multitude talks about compassion - sharing food and clothes.

- To tax collectors, talks about honesty _don't collect more than have coming to you.
- To soldiers, talks about integrity - "*don't intimidate and exploit people. Don't misuse your authority. Be content.*"
- None told to change their occupation, rather to honor God and love man within that occupation.

John's ministry was to get people prepared to meet Jesus! Isn't that our goal? It's in our vision statement: "*to attract people to Christ with love, grace and excellence.*"

Question I have for you, and for me is: "*What can we do to prepare for revival, for a move of God in our midst?*"

We can't create revival (only Holy Spirit can do that), but we can prepare for it.

Second paragraph has a quote from Isaiah, who had prophesied that Israel would return from Babylonian captivity. Would have to revamp the old city because of destruction, decay, and disrepair. Would need to repair walls and buildings once they got there. But first they had to get there.

Fast forward 700 years to time John is preaching. When Caesar would take a trip didn't have an "Air Force One" to fly in. Would send crew ahead to prepare the road. Included bridge work, leveling hills, repairing the roadbed.

As we prepare for the second coming of the King, what obstacles from your old life that need to be removed? What rubbish is cluttering up the king's highway?

Vance Havner tells of how when he was boy his father used to take him out in the country to see an old mill operated by a water wheel. The water from the creek flowed down and made the wheel turn, rotating the shaft of the mechanism inside the building to grind the wheat into flour.

If the miller came up one day and found that the stream was clogged up, his wheel wouldn't work. He could push and shove and try to turn the wheel himself.

He could even call in the men from the surrounding farms to help him. His efforts would be in vain until he went up the creek and pulled out the dead logs and debris that dammed up the water. With those hindrances out of the way, the water would flow down again and those wheels would begin to turn.

Today we have pastors and church leaders striving and straining trying to make wheels go around.

Church bulletins list all kinds of activities. Church members are urged to visit, call folks, sing in the choir, invite others to church, and pray for revival. There's nothing wrong with any of that.

"But," says Havner, "I've looked in vain for what is so obvious in the New Testament that I cannot understand our silence about it. Almost nothing is said about the need for repentance in the church. Isn't it about time that we first went up the creek, cleared the channel and removed the hindering debris of sin from our hearts and lives?"ⁱⁱ

What do we need to repent from?

- Materialism?
- Pride?
- Self-justification?
- Bad relationships?
- Unbelief?
- Negative attitudes?
- Self-centeredness?
- Old habits?
- Willful sins?

To prepare for a move of God – call it revival if you like – we need to repent, to ask God to change our hearts.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, [Peculiar Treasures](#), 1979.

ⁱⁱ "Spirit of Revival," Oct 1991. Page 4.