

SEEKING A SAVIOR
MATTHEW 3:1 – 12
01 MARCH 2020

It has been roughly 400 years since Malachi spoke his prophecies. 400 years since a recognized prophet of God arose among the people. 400 years since the Word of God was spoken to the Jews.

And 400 years is a significant period of time. In our own case, 400 years ago this August a ship called the *Mayflower* set sail with 102 pilgrims on their way to an unknown frontier that will called America. For us, the story of the pilgrims and the country's founding seems like ancient history. And so the words of Malachi, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah must have seemed to the Jews of the first century. Ancient history. A long time of silence from a God whose presence once dwelt among his people.

And this was a pressing theological concern for the Jews. God had allowed them to come back to Judea. They had rebuilt Jerusalem. They had rebuilt the Temple. But they did not have the presence of God among them. They may no longer have been physically exiled from their homeland, but they were still spiritually in exile from the presence of God.

They have searched the ancient words, and they know that God is going to come among them again. A messenger of the covenant – new covenant, even – will suddenly appear. And before his coming – which will reveal the hearts and motives of the people – God will send a forerunner – an opening act – a prophet in the spirit of Elijah.

The people know this. They long for this.

And their politicians seek to play to these hopes and expectations. Herod, who calls himself the Great, speaks of himself as King of the Jews. He marries the right people so his lineage appears royal from antiquity. He expands the Temple of Jerusalem – a sign, surely of God's favor. He feeds the people of Jerusalem during a famine to appear to be a bread-giver like Moses. He is working the optics of the moment to claim a place in God's story, a fulfillment of the hopes of the people.

Yet against the political maneuvering of Herod, a child is born in Bethlehem. Foreign wise men seek him out. The cosmos recognizes his greatness. Those foreign dignitaries have the presumption to show up in Herod's capital city and ask, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him."

Herod may try to co-opt God's story. He may try to make himself the central figure of God's salvation. But God will not be manipulated. And God will not be mocked. And God will demonstrate his power by using the weak things of the world to bring about the salvation of the world.

And before this baby in Bethlehem can grow up and accomplish this great act of God's faithfulness, God sends the forerunner – a man named John who becomes known as the baptizer. We call him John the Baptist, but that title isn't a statement of denominational identity – as though he could just as easily been John the Methodist or John the non-denominational. He was and is called the Baptist

because along with his ministry of proclamation he also had a ministry of baptism – of immersing penitent sinners in the Jordan River as a sign of their repentance and a cleansing of their sin.

Such a baptizing ministry may have appeared eccentric, done, as it was, in the Jordan River and not affiliated with the Temple in Jerusalem or the local synagogue. This was something new. So John's ministry was eccentric, and John, himself, was an eccentric character. Dressed in camel skin, eating locusts and wild honey, shunning the cities, living rough in the wilderness, John is not among the social-elite. But his words have power. And his ministry grabs the hearts of the people. And the people begin to come out to him in the wilderness. They leave the comforts of home and hear this prophet in the wild. They put their jobs on hold to be able to catch a glimpse of this strange man with a vivid message.

John gains quite a following. Later in the NT, we will discover that the extent of his ministry eventually reached far beyond Judea. Those who heard him and became his disciples took his message about God's faithfulness all around the empire. The Apostle Paul will encounter some of John's disciples half-way around the Roman Empire – and there he will be able to tell them that what John anticipated has become a reality, and Jesus is his name.

So what was so compelling about John's message? It wasn't one of salvation – not as you and I think of it. It was really more of a message of expectation – that salvation would soon arrive. So what made people flock to see John. It wasn't his eccentric clothes and diet. There were plenty of Jewish groups who made the wilderness their home, but they didn't become as influential as John.

So what was it?

Part of it was the **clarity** to John's message. And John was clear about two things. First, he was clear that the message that he was proclaiming was the message of God. It was ultimately about God. It was about God's faithfulness. It was about God's story. It was about God's salvation. It was about God's Kingdom becoming a reality on earth as it was in heaven. First, foremost, and always, John was pointing to the activity of God. This was crystal clear.

No one confused John's message with a message of social helps.

No one confused John's message with a message of political power.

No one confused John's message with a message of human development.

John's message was about God.

The Kingdom of God existed by God's power. It was God's idea in the beginning. God brought the idea into the world through the promises that God initiated with human beings – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Humans didn't dream this up. This was, is, and always will be God's work. God started it. God continues it. God will bring it to pass.

John is clear. His message to the people is clear. He is speaking about God.

To appreciate how significant this aspect of clarity is, let's consider for a moment what John did not speak about. He did not speak about love, though he would not have denied that God loved people. Still, he did not speak about love.

Nor did he speak about programs – either programs of help, or programs of social justice, or programs of religious education. John was not primarily programmatic.

He did not speak about worship, though I'm sure that if we asked him he would have said that the responses of baptism were acts of true worship – and that repentance and obedience was the worship that God truly desired.

Still, he did not bring up worship. Not worship. Not programs. Not love. God. The Kingdom of God. He spoke of God's plan. God's work. God's purpose. God. His message, flowed out of this deep appreciation for the faithfulness of God and the fact that God was at work in the midst of people. God was up to something!

So first and foremost, John clearly pointed to God. And second, he was clear about the human response. God started the work. God continued it. God would bring it to pass. But God also dignified human beings with real moral choices. People could and should respond rightly to God's activity. Because this was God's work, they weren't free to use God's work or co-opt God's work for themselves. This was a wrong response to God's work. But there was a right response. John calls his audience – he's clear about this – John calls his audience to respond rightly – to repent.

To turn. To turn toward God. To turn away from their rebellion, their selfishness, their pride.

To own up to their own moral responsibility. This was on them. They couldn't pass the buck or shift the blame. They were the sinners. They needed to repent. This was the clear call of God on their lives.

John did not affirm their destructive behaviors. He did not affirm their lifestyle choices, their economic choices, their political choices. In fact, John affirmed nothing about his audience. Their families didn't matter. Their Temple attendance didn't matter. Their knowledge of all things theological didn't matter. They were all sinners. Any hope for salvation began here – with an agreement with God that they were sinners – rebels. To agree with God is to confess. That's what confession means. Agreement. An agreement with God's assessment of life in general and your own life in particular.

An agreement and a turning – to a different path, a different set of behaviors, a different identity, a different life.

John was clear.

And John was also **urgent**. There is an immediacy to John's message. Now. At hand. Today.

John didn't say – go home and think about this. He wasn't content with a slow process of hoped for changes. John recognized that tomorrow might not be as today was. God was at work! Tomorrow

could be drastically different. Eternal change could happen in a moment. He stood at the Jordan River and evoked the imagery of the Promised Land. His audience would have known the story – the story of the Hebrews being saved from Egypt, given the life-giving covenant of God, blessed with God’s presence daily, coming to the border of the Promised Land and voting to not go in because the work looked too hard. But when they heard the alternative, they changed their minds. Suddenly they wanted to go up and enter the land, and they tried to do so, but the moment had passed. God was not with them. That door would not open again for 40 years.

Now John stands at the same Jordan River with a message of turning – of turning away from selfish rebellion – of turning to the will and direction of God – and now was the time, this was the day. The door might close and not open again for a generation – who could know? This wasn’t about their calendars or their choices or their plan for how things ought to look and when was the most convenient to follow God. God was at work! All John knew was that now was the moment they had. The Kingdom of God was at hand! This was the time for response! Don’t be caught on the wrong-side of the Lord’s promises!

Clarity and Urgency.

Both are necessary. Clarity without urgency leads to complacency. Urgency without clarity leads to confusion.

The church has been called to be both clear and urgent. And like John, our message is about God. We are stewards of a message that is not our own. We citizens of a Kingdom that is not of our own making. We are servants of a King who is at work today. We point to him, and we would do well to remember it. It is not about us. It is not about cultural accommodation. It is not an affirming word, though it is a word of life and hope – the only hope we can have – an eternal hope. We speak the words of God. We point to God’s plan. And we must do so clearly, not confusing the message of God with the messages of this world, the politics of this world, the nations or economies of this world. God’s work is bigger. God’s work is deeper. God’s work will outlast and outlive all these other works. We must be clear.

And we must be urgent. The Kingdom of God is hand. “We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work,” Jesus says. (John 9:4) Tomorrow is not guaranteed. Now is the time to put our shoulder to the wheel of God’s work – to join him in his purposes – to receive his promises and his grace. Now is the time. Today is the day.

In a moment I’m going to say a prayer of surrender to God’s will today – this moment. I’d invite you to join me in it. And after we pray, we will have a time of song and response. If there is something specific I can pray for you about, if there is some commitment you need to make – a repentance and public confession of Jesus as Lord, a decision to follow him in believer’s baptism – this is your time. Don’t wait. When the music starts, step out and meet me at the front.

Let’s pray.

Father, we confess today that we are sinners. We are selfish. We are prideful. We want our way rather than your way. We want blessing without obedience; we want forgiveness without repentance; we want a cheap grace that will enable and affirm us rather than the true grace that transforms us. Forgive us, Lord. Have mercy on us. And turn our hearts, our minds, and our lives to you. We want to be rebels no more. We want to be yours – citizens of your kingdom, servants of your freedom. Forgive us. Set us free. Rule over our lives, our families, and our church. Amen.