

Something for Everyone!
Matthew 3:1-12
Sunday, January 5, 2020

People that know the Bible, even just a little bit, often have a favorite book of the Bible.

My favorite book of the Bible is currently Judges. Judges has some amazing stories, and is also a very grim book. Some of it is very entertaining, but there's some pretty horrific stuff in there. Some pastors have even forbidden their staff from preaching sermons from the book of Judges! Judges makes you dig deep and really examine who God is, what Scripture is, and what people are truly like. Judges is puzzling, frustrating, bombastic, and memorable. Overall it leads me into the mystery and reality of God, and God's present work in a deeply fractured and divisive world.

What's your favorite Book of the Bible? Why?

As we often have favorite parts of Scripture that interest us or give us confidence, we also tend to have favorite authors, teachers, or even scholars. These are people that teach us about the Bible.

Some of these teachers have taught us things that were life changing. Some help us stay connected to our faith when we were ready to give it up. Some simply put into words the things we are already thinking.

These people have been used of God in our lives. They have helped and encouraged us.

But they are also people that we see as "on our side".

There is always the temptation to surround ourselves with teaching and thinking that helps us simply live the way we are living without challenging those ways of living and thinking. There is a false safety in surrounding ourselves with teachers and authors and believers that help us feel like we are on the right team and living the right way.

Enter John the Baptist. John the Baptist was an extremely popular speaker. People were compelled to go see him. They were travelling into the wilderness to hear him speak. ***"People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan."*** (Matthew 3:5) EVERYONE went to hear John.

The common people are there – even those like tax collectors who in that day were on the outside of religion and society.

The highly esteemed religious people were there. Have you ever been around a group of pastors when they "geek out" about a current author or teacher? It's nauseating – unless it's an author you like, too. The religious leaders are not "geeking out" about John the Baptist, but he certainly has their attention!

John even had the ear of a high ranking Roman politician – Herod who was governor over Galilee. John has appeal in all levels of society, and appeal across cultures. As far as speakers and teachers go, John the Baptist was a hot commodity.

But he was not gathering likeminded followers. He's really on the "side" of no one. No one could really make claims to him, because the message he delivered was:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2)

He is preaching a message of repentance. And this message of repentance is directed at everyone. He refuses to belong to any one side.

He is in the wilderness giving this message. He is a startling speaker. "Everything about John was startling: his sudden emergence, manner of dress, choice of food, preaching and baptizing."¹ The clothing he wore made of camels hair, and the food he ate of locusts and wild honey, let people know that he had rejected the luxuries of life.

Living as an outsider, belonging to no one, belonging nowhere, he is able to deliver an uncompromised message from God: "REPENT!"

That's mild stuff though. He also declared,

"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."
(Matthew 3:7-10)

This message, at least in the book of Matthew, had a very specific audience. This was directed at the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were the most religious people in Jewish society. They were who people went to for wisdom and input on their faith. They were the teachers of how to behave and how to follow God.

This would be similar to walking into a pastor's conference and hollering the same thing. (That reminds me – I now have the welcoming Scripture for our Mountain Standard Region pastors retreat at Gull Lake Camp!)

I'm convinced that anytime we read words of John the Baptist or Jesus directed at the religious leaders in the Gospels, we must read them as words Jesus may be directing at the church.

His big complaint against them? They did not bear fruit. They looked like followers of God. They had the essence of how to look religious down. But that's where it all ended – looking the part. There was no fruit that resulted from their behavior. No goodness, no generosity, no kindness, no compassion, no love, no care, no heart whatsoever that resulted in good deeds.

That describes an awful lot of religious people, including Christians. We can master things like spiritual habits, including Bible reading and prayer. We can be disciplined. We can be "god". And yet we can

¹ Hendrickson, William, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, Baker Book House, 1973, p. 192

have absolutely nothing to show in terms of fruit. Nothing to show in terms of a life that blesses and is generous to others in Jesus name!

I'm sure there were some in the crowd that loved seeing John the Baptist tear a strip off the Sadducees and Pharisees. "Ha! I knew it! I knew those guys were phony! I knew they were hypocrites! Give it to 'em, John the Baptist!"

But remember, John had no "side"; he wasn't partial to the religious or non-religious. Before anyone gets too comfy cozy in their own goodness, this similar passage in Luke 3 has him delivering this message to everyone. The message is followed by specific ways that people needed to repent.

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

Who here has a pantries and freezers full of food? Who has clothes buried deep in the closet or the dresser that you have not worn for years? Probably many of us! John is saying if you have extra, share.

Which is a weirdly difficult thing for many of us to do, myself included. Even when we have a lot we feel like we are living with a scarce amount.

John says, "REPENT!" and do so through the fruit of your actions.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

To the tax collectors John says deal fairly and honestly with people. Again, we live in a world that screams at us, "You don't have enough stuff! You could lose it all!" While there is a sliver of truth to this, God throughout history has been calling his people to trust in him. Work hard, be shrewd, but trust God to supply what you need.

The temptation is for us to take advantage of other people so that we are absolutely certain our needs are met.

John says, "REPENT!" and do so through the fruit of your actions.

¹⁴ 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."

I'm not sure how many of us have issues with extortion and false accusation. I'm not sure how many Walter Whites there are amongst us, growing more and more sinister by the day. But being content with pay? That's a tricky one. Being content with anything is hard. We spend our lives in the pursuit of more. We spend our lives ungrateful for what we already have.

John says, “REPENT!” and do so through the fruit of your actions.

I’m sure that if John the Baptist were in this room right now, he would find a way to touch the specific pressure points on all of our lives. And he may even have specific instructions for us to walk in a better way.

But “REPENT!” was only the beginning.

John the Baptist is not preaching a message of “you are bad – be good!” He is giving a message of preparation. “REPENT! ***For the Kingdom of Heaven has comes near!***” He is preparing for Messiah. He is preparing the way for Jesus. The “one who is coming after me” is greater than me! Be ready for Him!

John says,

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:11-12)

John says, I baptize with water. One scholar described the imagery of water as this – water only hits the surface. This act of repentance is one of getting ready, getting prepared, getting clean.

But Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire – these are images of being possessed and consumed.

Youth Pastor Dave Overholt shared a story of talking with young people who were into Wicca. In their discussion, they asked him, “Have you ever had an experience with the spiritual realm?”

Overholt eagerly responded. “I have! In fact, I’m possessed!”

He’s referring of course to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the idea that once we have surrendered our lives to Jesus we are possessed by the Holy Spirit. We fully and completely belong to Jesus, and we are not our own. We belong to Jesus.

When you think of fire, fire consumes. When you see images of house fires, or forest fires, everything is absolutely consumed. This is how Jesus comes to us. Not to destroy us. Instead He wants to consume every aspect of us. Our mind, our bodies, our vocation, our stuff. Jesus and his heavenly Kingdom come for all of it.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Have you repented? Are you possessed? Are you consumed?