

Sermon notes: December 8, 2019

Focus- John the Baptist's sermon in Matthew and Luke

Lectionary readings https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Advent/AAdv2_RCL.html

Pharisees and Sadducees - John's sermon about brood of vipers is harsh. Both Luke and Matthew portray John hating the complicity with power. Matthew is not concerned at all in talking about soldiers and tax collectors, but Luke seems to make the call of ethical living for these groups the main point. Just as there are as many sermons as there are preachers for a given text, each gospel is a different door to a biblical story. If you want to get really into textual comparison, look at Luke and Matthew side by side with me on the next page. Luke equals ethical practice, while Matthew wants you to know a Jewish prophet who was preparing for a Jewish Messiah.

Matthew in 2019 Lectionary *For Matthew in particular*, John the Baptist is portrayed as an eschatological (end of the world) person. John's clothes, food, and location are all about an Old Testament prophet --Elijah. Elijah is the prophet promised to return to usher in the Messianic age. John the Baptist is the forerunner to the messiah; therefore Elijah/John must occur before the coming of the Messiah/Jesus. John and Jesus are two peas in a pod. John is the holder for the snapped ball, while Jesus is the field goal kicker. While they are of one mind, John *points* the way, while Jesus *is* the way. I could keep going in the pairing metaphors, but I think you get the point.

The Rockstar Jesus one difficult subtext is how popular John was in comparison to Jesus. I have said this many times, but all the gospels are meant to take John the Baptist down a notch and largely minimize his role as rockstar preacher. Matthew says--*one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.* the Gospel of John says of John the Baptist: "*He must increase and I must decrease.*" John-as-big-tent-preacher cannot be overstated in order to understand how Gospel writers were trying to reframe their whole experience of Jesus.

Matthew in Greek {τῆ ἐρήμῳ Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν} translates as ---- (in) the wilderness, Prepare ye the way.

Matthew, like the other gospels, understands John to be the forerunner, the one going ahead. The one preparing the way, but a Jewish way.

Luke in 2018 Lectionary There were several people listening to John's sermon that he was specifically addressing. There were religious leaders, tax collectors, soldiers... I am not going to talk about the religious leaders because they already get a lot of preaching coverage. I wonder what would motivate a Jewish person to participate in the Roman military apparatus. Some of the soldiers in the audience were surely Jewish. A motivated Jewish person could earn Roman citizenship via military service, or could create a legacy for their kids, *Really good article about Jewish participation in Roman military* <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197158/pdf>

Luke in 2018 --Tax collectors -Some very entrepreneurial types would get into tax collecting, knowing they could stand to make a lot of money even at the cost of their social standing. The IRS is always hated, but Jews perceived the tax collector for Rome as traitors. Many of us would be tax collectors if we lived in that period - and would be grateful for the opportunity. Yet John the Baptist is remarkably even handed with them. He does not fall into the stereotypical hatreds of the day.

Luke's message about J the B --John's sermon is applicable to everyone, but it had a resonance with groups who collaborated with Rome to get rich - soldiers and tax collectors. His message was not for them to isolate from daily life, but to simply be content and to use their power for good. Where kindness replaces intimidation and peace replaces fear. Still today his message about letting your money be enough needs to be heard again. Love God, bless people, do your job, and don't use your job.

Present Day scamming – email scams are making the rounds at St. Timothy's and churches around the country right now. There are groups all over the world working scams; but at-the-moment, Lagos, Nigeria seems to be ground zero for much of the scams. I am sad if you got scammed but wonder if you were a young man growing up in Lagos without the connections, education, or family... you might be a scammer too. While they prey on our best nature, I believe John the Baptist would not leave them out of the call to ethical living but would call them into the circle of grace.

Occasionally, I find it helpful to look at what different Gospel writers focus on. They each try to tell a story, but through their own filter. Luke is focused on ethical living, while Matthew wants to make the point that Jesus' story is a Jewish story. When I use **"Both"** below I want to highlight the narrative they have in common, while the *sidebars* are the particular points the different writers want to make.

Luke 3:7-18

Both A John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him,

Both B "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Luke And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying

Both C "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Matthew 3:1-12

Both A In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Matthew This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Both B But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

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All four gospels are worthy of our reflection. Matthew and Luke taken together paint a picture of a John the Baptist as a prophet rooted in Jewish identity (Matthew) while being remarkably open to people from all walks of life (Luke). John the Baptist likely would have not gotten points from the people for being so "forgiving" of tax collectors and soldiers (Luke) nor of Matthew thinking of John the Baptist as Elijah. But if you get a bad rap for hanging out with the wrong people, you're in good company with John the Baptist and Jesus. **Todd**