

Witnessing Something Special – Matthew 3:13-17

I. Introduction:

- A. A few months ago, Sister Rosemary loaned me a book.
 - 1. It was work of fiction based upon the Bible.
 - 2. The author retold the story of the last days of Christ, weaving his imagination into what the Bible tells us.
 - 3. It was entertaining and enlightening.
- B. I'm going to try to do the same sort of thing this afternoon.
 - 1. I'm going to create a narrative based on the Bible, but I'm going to try to put **you** into that story.
 - 2. I want you to be a witness to some Biblical events – one in particular.
 - 3. And like many modern stories, I'm going to begin with today – before going back to fill in some of the background details.

II. Chapter One: Introduction.

- A. The scene opens with you and three dozen others intently watching and listening to Jesus of Nazareth.
 - 1. Everyone these days is talking about Jesus, but by the grace of God He is more to you than a point of conversation.
 - 2. You have come to understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.
 - 3. You are a nominal disciple, your faith is in Him, and you are trying to practice what He has been teaching.
 - 4. Somehow there has grown up in your heart a love, a respect, an awe of this man.
 - 5. In fact, it might be said that you worship Him.
- B. As the current lesson and interaction are going on, two men come up from the southwest, pushing their way through the crowd until they are standing right in front of Jesus.
 - 1. Politely they announce that they are disciples of John the Baptist.
 - 2. And they say, *“John wants to know if thou art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”*
 - 3. In other words, *“Are you the Messiah?”*
 - 4. Jesus replies, *“Tell John to look at my miracles, many of which fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets.*
 - 5. *Tell him that the dead are raised and the poor have the gospel preached unto them.*
 - 6. *And tell him – “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”*
 - 7. The visitors seem to be satisfied and leave, going back in the direction from which they came.
- C. Then Jesus turns his attention to us, and appearing to look you in the eye, and He asks,
 - 1. *“What went ye out into the wilderness to see?”*
 - 2. *“When you visited John down on the Jordan river, at the edge of the wilderness, what did you see?”*
 - 3. He answers his own question, *“I’ll tell you what you saw. You saw a prophet of God, and you should have listened to him.”*
 - 4. He goes on, *“Of the children of women, there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist.”*
 - 5. But then He adds in the most humble tone – *“However, John only holds a candle to me.”*
 - 6. And with that, He drops the subject.
 - 7. You think you understand what He has said, but there are others who, not only don't understand, but who are offended.

III. Chapter Two: Several months earlier.

- A. You and several of your neighbors are walking the road down on the eastern side of the Jordan River, intending to take the ford at Jericho in order to celebrate the next festival at Jerusalem.
 - 1. At Bethabara one of your companions points to a strange-looking man who is excitedly preaching to another group of travelers.
 - 2. The speaker is dressed like a wild-man in camel skins and leather.

3. Someone whispers laughing, *“That is John the Baptizer. You better stay away from him or he’ll have you dipped in the river.”*
 4. But you are curious. You slow to hear what he has to say while your companions walk ahead.
- B. There hasn’t been a true prophet of God in Israel in four centuries.
1. But this man is speaking to the crowd with the apparent authority of God.
 2. You hear him say, *“Repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* You stop in your tracks.
 3. You are of the opinion that the Kingdom of heaven demands the presence of the King of Heaven.
 4. If God’s kingdom is near then so is the Messiah.
 5. The Messiah is someone you have been earnestly hoping to see.
 6. Then someone says, *“This is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*
- C. The festival doesn’t officially start until tomorrow at sundown, so you decide to listen to this strange little man.
1. Later you learn that John is the son of a priest named Zacharias, who before his death had often served in the Temple.
 2. Rumor has it while working there in the holy place, elderly Zacharias, was visited by an angel who told him that contrary to nature and his age, he was going to father a son, and his name was to be John.
 3. John, did not follow his father into the priesthood, but spent most of his life in the desert, where, he claims, to have been visited by God.
 4. It was Jehovah, he says, who commissioned him to take people into the river and to immerse them.
- D. As you watch and listen, a group of fancy-dressed Pharisees and Sadducees approach.
1. John takes one look at them and rather unkindly says, *“O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*
 2. This provokes some low laughter from some of the other pilgrims who don’t like either of those parties.
 3. As you listen, you once again hear John refer to *“repentance.”*
 4. He says that before he will baptize anyone, he wants to hear testimony of their *“repentance.”*
- E. That is not a word often heard in Israel today; it is not a common word in any country in any age.
1. *“Repentance”* refers to a broken-hearted sorrow for sin; remorse.
 2. And as John explains it, he makes sure we understand that it is something recognized and loved by God.
 3. It appears that only repentant people are fit to be citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven.
 4. John refuses to baptize the proud Pharisees and the power-hungry Sadducees because they will not acknowledge their sins and turn from them.
 5. Until people admit they need the salvation of God – deliverance from sin – there will be no forgiveness.
- F. You are so intrigued by what this strangely dressed man is saying, you decide to spend the rest of the day there on the bank of the river.
1. After two hours of preaching and Bible exposition, John calls several people forward.
 2. He tells us that they have a desire to become citizens of God’s kingdom, and they want to be baptized.
 3. Then with joy and tears they, in their own way, express that the Spirit of God had brought their sins before their eyes.
 4. They willingly renounce those sins, vowing that with the Lord’s blessings they would never commit them again.
 5. There are two women who are dressed like whores – harlots – but John receives them gladly and dips them in the river.
 6. A couple of folk point to one man in the baptismal line, saying that he is a prominent tax collector.
 - a. When he comes up to John, he says that he will be fair and honest in the future, and that he will do his best to restore what he has stolen from people.

- b. He acknowledges God's grace in forgiving him, and he hopes that the people he had mistreated would forgive him as well.
 - c. One of your neighbors mutters, *"We'll see about that."*
 - 7. Among the people baptized that afternoon are an old man and his wife, two teenagers, a Samaritan and a man who confessed to being a former thief.
 - 8. Unlike all the Pharisees and Sadducees you have met during your life, John doesn't seem to have any problem with touching, speaking with and rejoicing with these sinners.
- G. As the sun sinks behind mountains to the west of the Jordan, the crowd begins to disburse.
- 1. It's time for you to find a place to sleep.
 - 2. You spread your bed-roll out under a juniper, eat the meal your wife has prepared for you, and you think about what John has been saying.
 - 3. You are exhausted, but it takes some time before you relax enough to begin a couple of hours of rest.
 - 4. At sun-up you are up, and with the rest of the pilgrims you make your way down to Jericho, across the river and then up through the pass in the hills across the plain to Bethany and then into the Kidron valley before entering the Holy City.
 - 5. The festal activities of the next three days so occupy your mind that you have little time to think about John and his message.

IV. Chapter Three – Meeting John once again.

- A. Nearly everyone from Galilee take the same road home – through Jericho, across Jordan and then north.
- 1. Very few would soil their feet with the dust of Samaria, even though the trip would be much shorter.
 - 2. You say *"Good-bye"* and *"Thank you,"* to the man who rented you a space in his stable for three nights.
 - 3. You join your friends at the Eastern Gate, and you begin the long walk home to your family.
- B. After descending into the Jordan valley, and fording the river, you once again walk several minutes before you hear the now familiar voice of John the Baptist.
- 1. And once again, you slow down in order to hear what he is saying.
 - 2. It is the same message, but in different words – *"Repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."*
 - 3. You hear him say, *"Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*
 - 4. You have been raised to believe that God loves you because you are a grand-child of Abraham.
 - a. But John says that this physical relationship is not enough – in fact it is nothing.
 - b. He explains that God is preparing to cut down and destroy Israel and the children of Abraham.
 - c. He sounds very much like the Old Testament prophets of whom you have heard in your synagogue back home.
- C. 'Then John says something unheard of – absolutely heretical –
- 1. He says that Christ is coming to gather His people – His wheat – into the storage bin He has prepared for their safe keeping. Safe-keeping from what?
 - 2. You hear John to say that at point the blessed Messiah will begin to judge the earth – Israel included – with unquenchable fire.
 - 3. You can see the few Sadducees in the crowd begin to fume – you hear the word *"heresy."*
 - 4. But John repeats himself – and he does so with extraordinary power – you might even say that he speaks with *"authority"* – divine authority.

V. Chapter Four: Baptism.

- A. Again, after several hours of Bible exposition and forceful preaching, John calls for people to step forward if they are willing to be baptized and to identify with the coming Messiah.
1. He goes to each of them one by one, asking them what sort of proof, or fruit, there is of their repentance.
 2. One says that by the grace of God he stopped his excessive wine-drinking; he hasn't been drunk in weeks and it seems that God was in control of that former weakness in his life.
 3. Another says he completely revamped his business, instructing his employees to be thoroughly honest.
 - a. He even increased their pay and made their jobs more comfortable.
 - b. Then with a grin he says that the Lord has blessed his business, making it more profitable than ever.
 4. A soldier – a Roman soldier – looks at us and says that he will never again do violence against us.
 5. A woman confesses that she had been a miserable wife to her husband, but despite his continued mistreatment of her, she was being as kind and loving as possible.
 - a. She adds that she has an inexplicable peace while trying to serve God and her family.
 - b. Then she points to her daughter, telling John to ask her if he had any doubts. He didn't.
 6. Another confesses that she no longer gossips about her neighbors.
 7. There was testimony after testimony similar to these.
 8. From time to time John did turn to the crowd, asking whether these testimonies were true.
 9. Then one by one, with John standing waist-deep in the river, they came to him and he dipped them backward into the chilly water, lifting them out again.
- B. Using words which I knew Paul later employed, John explained the symbolism of baptism.
1. He told everyone that baptism was an illustration – that it told a story.
 2. The only people he would baptize must be able to provide some evidence of repentance.
 3. They must agree with God about their sinfulness and consider themselves to be dead to those sins.
 4. He explained that when he immersed the repentant sinner, he was symbolically burying them. They were dead.
 5. They were laid back in their watery grave, but then he would lift them out of the water with the intention that they live new lives in the power of the Lord.
 6. He made sure that everyone understood that there was nothing efficacious or miraculous in the act of baptism – or the water in which they were dipped – or in the authority of John himself.
 7. His baptism followed the repentance of the sinner, and was nothing more than symbolical – a testimony.
 8. That afternoon, after his explanation, the Baptist immersed about fifteen people.
- C. You watch the baptisms, thinking about the other things John had said since you first saw him.
1. Then as the sun goes down, you once again find a place to place your head for the night.
 2. The ground is uncomfortable, but not nearly as uncomfortable as your heart as you meditate on John's message of sin, of righteousness and of judgment.
 3. You begin to wonder whether your family heritage – your nationality – is really all that is necessary to peacefully face God.
 4. You sense that your personal goodness is not what it ought to be in the light of the holiness of the Lord.
 5. For some reason the words of [Isaiah 64:6](#) come bursting into your mind – *“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”*
 6. You begin to worry about your own spiritual condition – something which you have never done before.
 7. No, you aren't a whore or a Sadducee, a leper or a publican; but you aren't really righteous either.
 8. Watching those people being baptized has stirred your soul somehow.
 9. Thankfully, after a considerable time, you fall into a fitful sleep.

- D. Awakening at dawn as you always do, you pull out the last of your wife's meals, and you think about the Messiah as you slowly eat.
1. You know that you'll be exceedingly hungry by the time you reach home, but you decide to spend another day listening to this desert madman – this prophet John.
 2. From your vantage point, you see John rising from his bed, & then you watch him in his morning devotions
 3. He obviously is reciting some scriptures that he has memorized, and then his eyes close and his lips move in silent prayer.
 4. After an hour or so of this, he reaches into his purse and pulls out his breakfast – it looks like locusts and a pot of honey.
 - a. He dips the insects into the nectar and then pops them into his mouth.
 - b. John is not the first person you've heard who eats like this, but you've never met one before.
 - c. Indeed this a unique individual. He reminds you of what you've heard about the prophet Elijah.
- E. At about the third hour of the day John mounts a small rise and begins to teach and preach once again.
1. It's the same message about repentance because the Messiah is coming with vengeance in His heart.
 2. He tells us that we must surrender to God – but also to trust Him for the blessings of His grace.
 3. John quotes, from memory, more scripture than any rabbi you have ever heard, and every verse makes complete and logical sense.
 4. One minute you are feeling as miserable as you ever have, and in the next you see more hope for your soul than ever before.
- F. At one point someone in the crowd shouts a question: *“Are you the Christ? Are you the Messiah?”*
1. Laughing John answers, *“I am not the one you are looking for.”*
 2. *“I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.”*
 3. At that point John's fierce face softens, and his eyes seem to look into the future.
 4. And he speaks someone whom he calls *“the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.”*
 5. Before he can explain, someone else interrupts, declaring his desire to be baptized.

VI. Chapter Five: The Baptism of Jesus.

- A. Towards the end of the day after a number of people have been immersed by John in the river, and most of the pilgrims from Galilee have once again started walking north, your eye catches a glimpse of a new-comer.
- a. You immediately recognize that it is the man everyone is talking about.
 - b. You have seen him in Galilee on several occasions.
 - c. You have heard people say that He has healed the sick and miraculously fed multitudes.
 - d. His name is *“Jesus,”* and he hales from Nazareth the village down the road from your home.
2. John recognizes him as well, and the powerful preacher stops speaking and bows his head in obvious respect.
 3. You can't hear Jesus' voice, but he gestures toward the river, apparently requesting baptism.
 4. You do hear John's reply, saying, that he ought to be baptized by Him.
 5. And then you faintly hear – *“Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.”*
- B. John reenters the water, and Jesus steps in to join him.
1. As you have seen several times, John lays Jesus back into, and below, the surface of the water before lifting Him up again.
 2. But on this occasion something astounding takes place, you see a dove descending from the sky to land upon the dripping head of Jesus.
 3. And then there is an extraordinary sound – a heavenly voice – which you think says, *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*
 4. You are so overwhelmed, so overcome with emotion, you can hardly see straight – you hardly see at all.

5. When John and Jesus come out of the water, they walked together behind a large bush and you lose sight of them.
6. Regaining your senses & running toward the place you last saw them, you search but can't find either man.
7. After nearly an hour, with every one else having left, you decide the only thing to do is return home.

VII. Chapter Six – Salvation

- A. You return home, but you do so as a different man.
 1. You have the same name, the same family, and you have the same occupation – selling the fish harvested from the Sea of Galilee.
 2. But what you have seen and heard has been used by the Spirit of God in such a way that you aren't so sure that your heart is the same.
 3. From the moment you reach home, your thoughts are about this Jesus – it's as if you were in love again for the first time in your life.
 4. You were told, and now you are sure and believe, that Jesus is *“the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world”* – including your own sin.
 5. From out of nowhere you find your heart to be filled with repentant sorrow, but at the same time you are reaching out to Christ for forgiveness and reconciliation with God.
- B. As a couple of weeks pass, you yearn to be baptized in order to tell the world that you too are a believer – you believe John's message and you believe that Jesus is the Christ.
 1. In order to be baptized you know you'll have to retrace your steps toward Bethabara.
 2. But then comes word that Jesus now has disciples, and they too are immersing repentant believers.
 3. The next time that Jesus and His disciples are in Galilee, you plan to publically confess your sins and your faith in the promise of God for salvation.
- C. Looking back on the previous few weeks, you are convinced that in witnessing those baptisms – first the baptism of those repenting sinners, & then the immersion of Jesus – that the Spirit of God spoke to your heart.
 1. First, you too wanted the joy that those wet faces expressed as they came out of the water.
 2. And you also recognized the necessity of spiritual cleansing and forgiveness from God.
 3. The symbolism wasn't been wasted on you.
- D. In the weeks to come, after Jesus' return to Galilee and as His own words fall on your heart and soul, you begin to see the meaning of John – *“the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.”*
 1. Christ Jesus is God's lamb, and He will soon be sacrificed like the yearly Passover Lamb.
 2. Your faith in Christ as God's sacrifice, proves that the Lord has granted you a new heart.
 3. You've been born again, to live a new life in Christ.
 4. Now, you can't wait to be baptized as a testimony of Jehovah's saving grace.

VIII. Epilogue – The Christian Life

- A. With a smiling Jesus looking on, you are baptized by Matthew in the waters of the Sea of Galilee.
 1. You willingly join many others in following Christ Jesus and listening to His exposition of the Bible.
 2. You quickly grow spiritually, and there are changes in your life which give even more evidence that you are a new creature in Christ.
 3. It is not easy to be one of Jesus' disciples, but you find that you have never been more contented.
- B. And you can easily say to anyone who will listen, *“There is joy in serving Jesus.”*