

John 1:19-34  
Ezekiel 36:16-38  
Psalm 44

“The Voice in the Wilderness”

March 1, 2020

The LORD said to all the house of Israel that the day was coming  
when he would take them from the nations and gather them to their own land –  
when he would sprinkle them with clean water – and cleanse them from their idols –  
when he would give them a new heart and put a new Spirit within them.

And the result would be that the desolate land would become like the garden of Eden –  
and the people of God would flourish.

He promises that he will increase their people like a flock!

“Like the flock of holy things”

(which means, as the ESV translates, “a flock for sacrifices”) –

Like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts,  
so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people.”

There was a sense in which the restoration from Exile happened 70 years later.

God’s people were restored to the land –  
and the temple *was* rebuilt.

And they certainly did *better* at avoiding idols –  
but it would be hard to see how they were sprinkled with clean water –  
it would be hard to see how the Spirit was poured out.

And the cities of Judah certainly didn’t look like the garden of Eden...  
but they did still come to Jerusalem every year for the feasts –  
bringing their flocks...

And so John came baptizing in the wilderness saying,

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

John saw that Jesus was the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36.

He was the Lamb of God – the sacrificial offering that would take away our sin.  
He was the one who would wash us – and cleanse us – and give us his Spirit!

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 44 – is a song that reflects on these themes.

It is a song of the faithful sufferers.

We trust God – we believe in him! –

but we are afflicted – we are distressed!

We are like sheep led to slaughter.

And so we ask God to have mercy on us!

Sing Psalm 44 (PHSS)  
Read John 1:19-34

John came to bear witness to Jesus.

The theme in this section is building on the “weakness” theme of “the Word became flesh.”

If you think about it –

John’s “voice in the wilderness” is a pretty pathetic voice!  
Judea is a tiny, beaten-down little country.  
And John has gone out to the Jordan River –  
a backwater in the middle of nowhere.

The Jordan River, after all, runs down to the Dead Sea.  
It’s the ultimate dead-end road!

What kind of faith did it require for John the Baptist to stand up and say,  
“Make straight the way of the Lord!”  
The kingdom of God is at hand!?

Bearing witness to Jesus will *always* take courage.

It has always seemed a little crazy.

But especially when you have this odd prophet out in the wilderness,  
eating locust and honey and throwing water on people!

Who is this man?

You’re not alone in asking!

That’s what the Jews in Jerusalem were wondering!

## **1. Who Is John? The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness (v19-23)**

### **a. John Is Not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet (v19-21)**

<sup>19</sup> *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”*

In the first part of chapter 1, John the Evangelist has mentioned John the Baptist twice.

He told us in verse 6 that John the Baptist was sent as a witness –  
to bear witness about the light.

And he told us in verse 15 that John bore witness about the Son –  
“this is he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me,  
because he was before me.’”

The theme of “bearing witness” is a regular theme in John’s gospel.

John’s testimony is where it starts –

but it will continue to reappear over and over in John.

The verb “to bear witness” is used more than 30 times in John

(and only 50 times in the rest of the NT).  
Likewise, the noun “witness” is used 14 times in John  
(and only 23 times in the rest of the NT).

We also are introduced to the “Jews.”

If you think about it, verse 19 sounds a little odd:

“the *Jews* sent priests and Levites” to talk with John.

Usually you would think of the “Jews” as the broader category –  
referring to all descendants of Judah.

And sometimes John uses “Jews” in that way –

but other times, the term is used particularly of the leaders of the Jews –  
especially those who are hostile to Jesus.

But this was the point that John made earlier –

“he came to his own place, and his own people did not receive him...”

John will highlight this point repeatedly

by speaking of the “Jews” as those who refused to receive him.

Of course, it is worth noting that most of those who *did* believe in him  
during his lifetime were also Jews!

At least – they were Jews *ethnically*.

Part of the point that John is making is that ethnic Jewishness is not worth anything.

What matters is believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God!

But the Jews sent priests and Levites to ask John: “Who are you?”

<sup>20</sup> *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”* <sup>21</sup> *And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”*

And John said, “I am not the Christ.”

I am not the Messiah.

There had been a number of Messianic movements before Jesus.

Usually the focus was on a political revolution against Rome –

reestablishing the kingdom of God.

So John is making clear – I am not the messiah – I am not a political revolutionary.

Okay – so are you Elijah?

God had said through the prophet Malachi that he would send Elijah  
before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

Some took that to mean that Elijah himself would return.

Others thought that it was just a figure *like* Elijah.

And John certainly *dressed* like Elijah!

Certainly John *preached* like Elijah!

Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!

Jesus will later say that John *was* the Elijah who was to come –  
so when John says that “I am not” Elijah –  
he's saying that in the literal sense.  
I am not who you think Elijah is.

That's also true of the “prophet.”  
Moses had spoken of a prophet like himself whom God would send.  
John says, “That's not me.”

Part of John's point is that he doesn't want others to define his ministry.  
If he accepts their label, they will be able to put him in a box.  
And he doesn't want to be in their box!

**b. John Is the Voice in the Wilderness (v22-23)**

<sup>22</sup> *So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”* <sup>23</sup> *He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight<sup>[h]</sup> the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”*

In Isaiah 40, this was the opening cry proclaiming the return from exile.  
John is saying that the return from exile is at hand!

But wait...!

The Jews had returned from exile 500 years ago!  
For 500 years, the people of Judah had dwelt in the land.  
For 500 years, they have worshiped at the new temple –  
the second temple – that Zerubbabel built.

And yet John says, no – these 500 years have been continuation of the exile.  
Yes, in one sense, the people have been restored –  
the temple has been rebuilt –  
and, in fairness, the Jews have been *more faithful* to God than ever!!

From the time of Moses to the time of Jesus,  
there had never been a period of greater faithfulness to God and to his Law  
than the two hundred years before Jesus.

But – when you consider that whole history –  
that's not saying much.

When I look at my own life, I think that I can honestly say  
that the last year has been the best year yet in my faithfulness to God –  
and yet, I have woefully fallen short in so many ways!

*I need to hear the voice in the wilderness!*

“Make straight the way of the Lord!”

After all – what was *missing* in the return from exile in the days of Zerubbabel?  
When the temple was rebuilt – and the people rejoiced – but the old men wept...

When they dedicated the temple, the glory of the LORD did not return.  
Ezekiel had seen a vision of the glory of the LORD *departing* from the temple.  
But *no one* saw the glory of the LORD return.

Haggai *promised* that the glory of the latter temple would surpass the glory of the former,  
but for 500 years, it hadn’t happened!

John the Baptist says that he is the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Lord.

And in Isaiah 40, it is preparing the way for *Yahweh* –

“make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

John plainly understands that his purpose is to prepare the way for God himself to come.  
It’s why John says that the one who comes after “was before me.”

What was missing from the return from Exile?

God himself.

The presence of God with his people.

So when John says that he is the voice in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord –  
he is saying that he has come in order to prepare the way for God himself to come.

But this prompts another question:

## **2. Why Is He Baptizing? That Christ Might Be Revealed (v24-38)**

### **a. What Did Baptism Mean to the Jews? (v24-25)**

<sup>24</sup> (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) <sup>25</sup> They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

In other words, if you were the Christ, the Elijah, or the Prophet,  
then we would understand what you are doing!

They are saying that they understand why someone would baptize –  
they just don’t understand why *John* is baptizing  
if he is *not* the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet.

In the Jewish world of John’s day there were a variety of symbolic washings (or baptisms)  
that were practiced by the Jews.

When a man was consecrated as a priest, he would first wash with water –

when a leper was cleansed, he would first wash with water –  
when a Gentile converted to Judaism, before he could circumcised,  
he would wash with water (like Naaman, the Syrian).

In the same way that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,  
so also Gentiles would pass through water before they could be joined to God's people.

But John came baptizing with a baptism of repentance.  
John called all Israel to come to the Jordan River and be baptized – be washed.

When Israel crossed the Jordan River the first time,  
the Jordan River parted as soon as the priests carrying the ark entered the stream.  
In other words, the *presence of God* parted the River –  
and Israel entered the promised Land.

When Elijah was taken up into heaven, he parted the Jordan River on his way *out* of the land;  
and when Elisha returned – he parted the Jordan River on his way back in –  
at which point the sons of the prophets declared that the Spirit of Elijah  
rests on Elisha!

And John now baptizes at the Jordan River so that *that same Spirit*  
might descend upon the Son of God  
in order that He might baptize with the Holy Spirit –  
that he might give the Holy Spirit to all of God's people!

What John is saying is that the return from exile has come.  
But why does he baptize Jews?  
Because John is saying that the Jews are still tainted by the uncleanness of exile.  
It's not just Gentiles that need to be cleansed!  
We have all become unclean!  
We are all tainted.  
And we all need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb!

The day has come when God himself will come and dwell with his people.

This is why we read Ezekiel 36.

The day has come when God will sprinkle his people with clean water –  
the day has come when he will remove their heart of stone  
and give them a heart of flesh –  
placing *his Spirit* within them.

And John says that this is what baptism is all about!  
John's baptism was designed to reveal Jesus:

**b. John's Baptism Was Designed to Reveal Jesus (v26-28)**

<sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,  
<sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." <sup>28</sup> These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John sees that there is one standing in their midst  
who has yet *not* been revealed.

"the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

I don't know how often you have untied someone else's shoes!

But that is generally an act of great humility!

John's gospel is the gospel that tells how Jesus *washed* his disciples' feet.

John here says that he is not worthy even to untie Jesus' sandals!  
(much less wash his feet!)

And then the next day:

**3. Behold, the Lamb of God (v29-34)**

**a. The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World (v29-30)**

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" <sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'

John sees the whole of Ezekiel 36 coming together in Jesus.

Jesus is the Lamb of God – the lamb for the sacrifice –

the one who takes away the sin of the world through his own death.

But John also sees that Jesus is the one who was "with God" and "was God"!

How much of this did John the Baptist fully comprehend?

Good question!

How much of this is John the Evangelist retelling with much clearer hindsight?

Good question!

But John the Baptist plainly understood that Jesus was the one who would fulfill  
all that the scriptures had said.

And further, we are never told what John the Baptist knew.

We are only told what John the Baptist *said!!*

And John the Baptist *says* that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And John the Evangelist sees clearly what this meant –

and so included it in his gospel in order to show *you* who Jesus is!

And then in verse 31, John the Baptist says something really interesting:

**b. Water and the Spirit – the Sign and the Thing Signified (v31-33)**

<sup>31</sup> *I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.*” <sup>32</sup> *And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.*” <sup>33</sup> *I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’*

We know from Luke that John and Jesus are relatives.

John’s mother, Elizabeth, is a relative of Jesus’ mother, Mary.

So what does John mean by “I myself did not know him”?

People have speculated with all sorts of answers:

maybe Elizabeth and Mary never told their sons about their birth.

Maybe Elizabeth and Zechariah died shortly after John’s birth,

and he was sent away to live with relatives who didn’t know the story.

Our problem is that we just don’t know enough to answer the question.

So let’s not speculate.

John’s point here is to make a sharp distinction between himself and Jesus.

In other words – “I didn’t set this up. I’m not the one driving the story.”

John was sent to baptize – in order that Jesus might be revealed to Israel.

The promise of Ezekiel 36 was that God himself would sprinkle Israel with clean water.

And God himself would place *his Spirit* upon his people.

John came as the voice in the wilderness –

calling his people to leave their comfortable homes and cities –

and go out to the Jordan River –

the place where Israel first entered the land –

to leave even the temple in Jerusalem –

and go out like Naaman the Syrian to be washed in the Jordan.

John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance.

But it also pointed beyond itself:

<sup>32</sup> *And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.*” <sup>33</sup> *I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’*

Of all the thousands of people whom John baptized,

only *one* received the Holy Spirit.

To receive John’s baptism was to acknowledge your sin – to admit that you were unclean –

but John's baptism was merely a baptism with water.

What is the difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism?

In Acts chapter 19, there were those who had received only the baptism of John –  
and they did not even know that there *was* a Holy Spirit!  
So they had to be baptized in the name of Jesus – so that they would receive the Spirit.

The difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism  
is found in the *name* of the triune God.

John's baptism was like all of those ceremonial washings in the OT –  
it pointed *forward* to Jesus –  
but it lacked the *power* of Jesus – the *power* of the Holy Spirit!  
That's why Christian baptism is always  
*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Of all the thousands of Jews who received John's baptism,  
only Jesus received the Holy Spirit.  
But those who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ –  
we are baptized by one Spirit into one body.

### c. The Lamb Who Is the Son of God (v34)

<sup>34</sup> *And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son<sup>[u]</sup> of God."*

Do you believe John's witness?

Another way of asking this is: Do you believe that history is important?

Do you believe that it is important that Jesus Christ *really* died 2,000 years ago?  
that he *really* rose from the grave three days later?  
that he rose again in history? *physically?* with his own body?  
And that *your* body will be raised from the dead?  
*physically? Bodily?* in history?

Does it really matter?

As Paul says, if Christ is not raised from the dead, our faith is in vain.

Nine days ago we buried my father.  
Was it really Dad that we buried?  
When I was growing up, I used to hear people say,  
"Oh, that's not really uncle Bill,

he's in heaven with Jesus."  
But that was really Bill Wallace that we buried.  
His body is just as much a part of him, as his soul is.  
And Dad's body still belongs to Jesus.  
Even though he is now six feet under the earth,  
he belongs to Jesus,  
and awaits the resurrection of the dead—*in history*.

After all, as our Shorter Catechism says,  
"The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness  
and do immediately pass into glory;  
and their bodies, being still united to Christ,  
do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

In our text today, we see the importance of the body in baptism.  
Is baptism really important?  
Do you really need to have water poured on you?

It all depends on whether you believe that history is important!  
Will your BODY be raised from the dead!

Did Jesus die and rise again BODILY in HISTORY?  
Will you be raised BODILY in HISTORY?  
then you need to be baptized BODILY in HISTORY!!!

Some say that all that matters is what you believe.  
As long as you believe it, it doesn't matter whether it REALLY happened.

Some say that it doesn't make a difference whether Jesus was raised from the dead;  
and it doesn't matter whether YOU will rise from the dead,  
believe whatever gives you comfort!

But the Word of God says that history is important--the BODY is important.  
Baptism happens in history.  
In baptism, YOUR BODY is washed with water.  
It is the moment in history where your body--your self--is identified with Christ.

Why did John come baptizing?  
Why did he come using such an outward, bodily, physical picture?  
He says that he came as  
"the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord!"

But why, if his task was to preach, did he baptize?  
In v. 31 John says, "I did not know Him;

but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water."  
John baptized with water--that physical, bodily sign--  
to reveal the Lamb of God to Israel.

Many were baptized with water--with the baptism of repentance--  
but only one received the Holy Spirit.

As John baptized the multitudes,  
washing their bodies with water,  
he was reminding Israel of the promise in Ezekiel 36  
that God would sprinkle them with clean water, and give them the Holy Spirit.  
But John's baptism did not give them the Holy Spirit.  
They simply got wet...

But then Jesus himself came to John,  
and John declared: "Behold!  
The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"  
And as John baptized Jesus,  
Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit. (v33)

The baptism of John was a bodily, physical picture of Christ--in HISTORY.  
And when Jesus came to be baptized, he was revealed as the Lamb of God.

And when *you* are baptized into Christ – *you* receive Christ – *you* receive his Holy Spirit.  
The name of the Triune God is placed upon you.

And when the Spirit of God is poured out upon his people,  
then his people are equipped to proclaim the good news – the gospel –  
to the nations.

We become his witnesses.  
We'll come back to that next time!