

A WILDERNESS VOICE CRYING OUT

John 1:19-28 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

True prophets are rare. They are solitary people. Like eagles, they do not usually appear in flocks like geese. True prophets do not blend in with crowds, or merge into the fog. They stand out. Noah stood alone before his contemporaries. Even his family knew he was a preaching prophet, building a huge ark, built to float on dry ground. He was prophesying God's judgment on the world. Elijah stood alone on Mt. Carmel as a true prophet of God, amid 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. John the Baptist was also, a prophet who came in the spirit of Elijah, preaching repentance to Abraham's children, and pledging his head to heaven for the Gospel. There was no person living in the time of Jesus' first coming to earth, often called His advent, who was so important to our Lord. This advent of Jesus takes us on an adventure into the wilderness, all the way down to the region by the Jordan River. Matthew, Mark, and Luke make much of John's outward appearance and his diet, but John the evangelist says nothing about John the Baptist outwardly.

Matthew 3:4 states, "Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." Mark repeats the same description in Mark 1:4. In Luke 7:24-28, Jesus spoke to the crowds, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Until John the Baptist was arrested and beheaded, he was popular. Jesus said of John in John 5: 35, "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." John the Baptist was a powerful preacher, saying "Messiah is coming," and the Jews were ready, or so they thought, for Messiah to arrive. That was the message people wanted to hear. The Jews were weary waiting centuries for the biblical prophecies about Messiah to come to pass. They were weary of the occupying Roman forces that were in their land, who desecrated the land because they were Gentiles. The Jews were weary of the Roman presence.

John was preaching repentance saying, "Get ready for Messiah's coming." So, John headed down to the Jordan Valley. He went to Bethany beyond the Jordan. This Bethany was not the famous Bethany outside Jerusalem where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. This was Bethany beyond the Jordan River, about thirteen miles south of the Sea of Galilee, and about twenty-six miles south and east from Nazareth. John the Baptist didn't come with a bulldozer, moving dirt, filling holes, knocking down mountains, elevating valleys, clearing obstacles off the path, leveling uneven ground, and straightening up crooked roads. Yet, he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5. His forerunner message was, "Repent of sin and get ready for Messiah's coming."

This repentance message of John the Baptist was a spiritual message of road building. Even for us here in this sanctuary today, we all need to be always involved in spiritual road construction. The low places that need elevated are the base things in our lives that need to be brought up. The high things are the elevated self-righteous, prideful, hypocritical things, that need to be brought low. The crooked things, the deviant things, the lying lips, the gossiping hearsay, the slanderous condemnations of each other, need to be straightened out. The clutter of our lives lived in carnality and fleshly lusts, need to be cleared off so that the road and path is clean for us to walk to Jesus and with Jesus, step in step with the Gospel. This is all a part of the message of repentance. Dealing with the issues of our hearts is necessary, for our hearts can take us wretchedly high in self-elevation, or wretchedly low in self-debasing and even suicidal thoughts.

Now we turn to our text today, in John 1:19-28, to examine carefully, the testimony of John the Baptist when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him who he was. The word Jews appears 70 times in the Gospel of John and most often it refers to the Jewish nation as represented by the religious leaders who were hostile to Jesus. These Jewish leaders, led by the Pharisees, were enemies of the truth, of righteousness, of godliness, of repentance, and of John the Baptist and always, they set themselves against Jesus. This delegation of priests and Levites was sent by the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin. The priests were not the scribes, who were the theologians, nor the Sadducees, who were the Jewish leaders with money and power. They were not Pharisees making up 71 leaders, including the high priest in the Sanhedrin. The Levites did menial work to support the priests. They worked at the temple. Under lieutenants of the temple captain, they worked as police/a riot squad in crowd control to keep the peace. The priests were the questioners coming to John the Baptist, and the Levites were their protectors.

You can imagine the rumors of this true prophet of God. The rumors would have kept a teletype machine busy in any newsroom. Many were saying John the Baptist was the Christ, Messiah. John the Baptist's social status and honor came from his father, Zechariah, a faithful rural priest. So, you can almost hear the buzz among the Jewish religious leaders because John was behaving as a prophet which was not in keeping with his priestly heritage. John was not preaching or baptizing in cities or villages, but out in the wilderness, most likely where the children of Israel once crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. Crossing the Jordan River with its strong flow, is mentioned repeatedly in the Old Testament, and crossing into that green, fertile valley land was not easy. That was the baptism site John chose.

John's baptism was unique. Many Gentile converts or proselytes came to believe in God, and they were baptized. Some Jewish communities practiced self-baptism for cleansing, as many did at Qumran. But John was doing the baptisms and those being baptized were not Gentiles, but Jews. John the Baptist even called the Jewish religious leaders to repent and be baptized. This was horrifying/offensive to these racially, religious proud Jews. John the Baptist was calling the chosen people to repent and be cleansed, and to bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, not relying on their Jewish roots for a right standing before God. Imagine!!!

Now this interrogation sent by the Sanhedrin was a test for John the Baptist, but for him, it became his platform for sharing his testimony. From this test came a mighty testimony that I pray will help us learn to give our testimonies to unsaved friends and neighbors. There are five mighty testimonies John the Baptist made, that we must learn to make ourselves to others we pray will come to believe in Jesus.

TESTIFY YOUR CONFESSION OF WHO YOU ARE NOT. (I.) Notice v. 19-20. We read, “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are You?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” Now the priests were doing the questioning. In Judaism, the only qualification for the priesthood was descent. If a man was not a descendant of Aaron, nothing he could do, could make him a priest. And conversely, if a man was a descendant of Aaron, nothing could stop him from being a priest. Thus, this was an important question for these priests to ask, for John the Baptist was in fact, a priest, the son of Zacharias (Luke 1: 5) Why was a priest baptizing? That was strange, unusual, and one of the functions of the Sanhedrin was to deal with anyone who was suspected of being a false prophet. John the Baptist was known now all over Israel as a preacher of righteousness, and multitudes were flocking out in hordes. John was not acting as a priest, or conforming to the normal ways of a preacher. This man was doing something brand new, and the Jewish leaders looked upon him askance. The Levites were accompanying the priests, as bodyguards, police through the Jordan wilderness.

John the Baptist was shown by the Holy Spirit the most important thing to answer them, because the rumors were, “He must be Messiah!” The time was ripe for the coming of Messiah. The Jews were groaning under the heel of Rome. They yearned for a deliverer. This was utmost in their minds when they asked John, “Who are you?” Notice, John’s unique reply, which was positive, negative, and then positive. We read, “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” There was almost a hint in John’s words that he was saying, but I know who is! That’s why he confessed, denied, and confessed. This reply was more than a reply. John might easily have answered them, giving his name, his parent’s names, and tell of his divine commission to be the forerunner of Christ. Instead, John was true to his continual testimony which always pointed away from himself to Jesus Messiah. Some people wrongly think Christ is Jesus last name. Christ rather means “anointed one” referring to the only eternal King and Deliverer. John’s first testimony and confession was to squelch a false rumor. 2nd,

TESTIFY YOUR DENIAL OF WHO OTHERS THINK YOU ARE. (II) Notice v. 21. We read, “And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” John’s denial of being the Anointed One, Christ didn’t satisfy this delegation of priests. They began probing deeper using the other claims that were being rumored. They asked, “Are you Elijah?” John said, “I am not!” This question rests on Malachi 4: 5-6, which all the rabbis interpreted then as Elijah coming back in person to prepare the Messianic kingdom. Judging by John the Baptist’s dress, it would not have been too hard to surmise that John actually was Elijah of old coming back to life.

Malachi said, “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” John, knowing their literal surmising well, answered, “I am not.” In Luke 1: 17, the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his elderly wife would bear a son, (John the baptizer) and “he will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 11: 13, 14, “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Coming down from the Mt. of Transfiguration, the disciples spoke to Jesus of the scribes saying that “first Elijah must come.” Jesus told his disciples, whom they had seen glorified before their eyes with Moses and Elijah literally present, in Matthew 17: 11-13, “Jesus answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also, the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that Jesus was speaking to them of John the Baptist.” Yes, John said he was not literally, Elijah, though the angel Gabriel and Jesus rightly said he came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

This denial was not enough. They asked him now, “Are you the Prophet? John answered, No!” No thinking Jew forgot Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like Me from among you, from your brothers—it is to Him you shall listen—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.” When we testify, what must we deny? We must deny claims to be someone we are not. Testifying is not about our credentials, but Jesus’ credentials. When we testify, there must be no calling attention to our prominence or credentials. Jeremiah said in 45: 5, “Do you seek great things for yourself. Seek them not.” Thirdly,

TESTIFY YOUR INVITATION TO REPENT AND COME TO JESUS. (III.)

Notice v. 22-23. We read, “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?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” At this point, this delegation had nothing positive to respond to the Sanhedrin, nothing to put in their report. So they went back to their original question, adding, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us.” Freely quoting from the Messianic portion of Isaiah 40:3, “A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” John the Baptist now had their attention, saying, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.” John now admitted, “I am that voice.” This admission was the call of John the Baptist for these priests and Levites to repent, and prepare the

way of the Lord. The picture Isaiah gave is of a king about to visit a province in his realm. Roads back then were not surfaced as today. They were mere tracks. The roads must be smoothed and straightened, with all obstructions removed. The people coming to be baptized got the spiritual picture. These priests and Levites had to understand that John was inviting them to repent and come to the Messiah who was coming. John was preaching in a vast wilderness, and we are living in a spiritual wilderness today. God is calling for our voice to be heard today. What a need there is for voices to exalt the Savior, to call people to repentance and faith. Oh, to be worshippers who testify the need to repent to Jesus. We cannot divorce testimony from worship. We must worship the One we testify of and testify of the one we worship. These priests and Levites turned down the invitation, proceeding to make hazardous and treacherous and make fatal the way of the Lord. Fourthly.

TESTIFY YOUR EXPLANATION OF WHY YOU ARE TESTIFYING. (IV.)

Notice v. 24-26. We read, “(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands One you do not know...” Now this delegation began their assault of John. They began verbally rebuking him for baptizing in an unauthorized, illegal act. With the confidence of a prosecuting attorney in a courtroom who finally made his case, they asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet—meaning Messiah?” This they thought was their “gotcha!” It had to vex them that this son of one of their own priests was baptizing. The priests knew any cleansing/baptism of the people was a distinctly Messianic act according to Ezekiel 36: 25-27. They were thinking, “We’ve got you—why are you baptizing? John’s reply was, “I baptize in water, but among you stands One you do not know. Matthew 3: 11 states the rest of his words saying, “But He who is coming after me is mightier than I...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John is saying, “There is a vast difference between me acknowledging your repentance and baptizing you, and what Messiah will do. He is here standing in your midst. In your eagerness to expose me as a false Messiah, you have overlooked and failed to recognize the real Messiah.” Never forget in testifying, to show the vast difference in who you are and who Jesus is. He alone saves. Fifthly,

TESTIFY YOUR UNWORTHINESS TO BE A DISCIPLE OF JESUS. (V.)

Notice v. 27-28. “Even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. These things took place in Bethany, across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” In that day, rabbis were not paid by disciples, but rabbis could be compensated by disciples doing a slave’s job, except for untying the rabbi’s sandals. Disciples drew the line there. Doing that was too menial for even a disciple. John the Baptist stated, “I am not even worthy to do a slave’s job for Jesus. Humility must take a lower place. Humility requires repentance, and repentance requires humility—both are counter cultural necessities of being Jesus’ disciple. Who do we think we are? Beatrice Bush Bixler, wrote over 1,000 hymns. In 1949, at age 33, she wrote “I Am Not Worthy!” Testify 1-5—Who we’re not, deny who some think we are, inviting others to repent and come to Jesus, explaining difference in what we do and what Jesus does and our unworthiness.

-1 I am not worthy the least of His favor, But Jesus left heaven for me; The Word became flesh and He died as my Savior, Forsaken on dark Calvary.

Chorus: I am not worthy this dull tongue repeats it! I am not worthy this heart gladly beats it? Jesus left heaven to die in my place What mercy, what love and what grace!

-2 I am not worthy the least of His favor, But "In the beloved" I stand; Now I'm an heir with my wonderful Savior, And all things are mine at His hand.

-3 I am not worthy the least of His favor, But He is preparing a place Where I shall dwell with my glorified Savior,
Forever to look on His face.