

“The man who was not the Messiah”

John 1:19-28

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There is no question that the gospel writers want us to know something about John the Baptist. To a person the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John want us to know John the Baptist is a big, big man. You could almost say John the Baptist was not just a big, big man, he was larger than life. Matthew tells us “His clothes were made of camel’s hair and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” John the Baptist, this big, big man, he stood up against religious leaders who were riding high on their own reputation and trusting in their own righteousness, or self-righteousness. John called out those religious leaders, “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.” Anyone bold enough to talk to the religious leaders with that fire and fervor is definitely a big, big man. (Matthew 3:1-12)

It turns out John the Baptist was not just bold enough to call out the religious leaders, John the Baptist spoke truth to power. He told King Herod that the relationship Herod had with his brother Philip’s wife was not lawful. Herod had the power to imprison John, but that didn’t stop him from speaking truth to the one in power. Speaking that truth to power not only got John imprisoned, it got him beheaded. Matthew tells us, “On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.’ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and he had John beheaded in prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried to her mother. John’s

disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.” (Matthew 14:6-12) John the Baptist could have stepped back from the brink. He didn’t have to play the role of the prophet, the role of speaking truth to power. The fact that he did not shirk his duty shows us that indeed, John the Baptist was a big, big man.

John the Baptist was a big man who drew big crowds. Matthew tells us people went out to him from Jerusalem and Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Mark says the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to see him in the desert. Luke depicts things in much the same way, telling us crowds came to John to be baptized. Jesus himself seems to understand how big John was. When John was beheaded, and when the disciples of John told Jesus about his horrific death, we read in Matthew, “When Jesus heard what had happened (to John the Baptist), he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” (Matthew 14:13) John’s death made a big impact on Jesus, so much so that he retreated to a quiet and solitary place. John the Baptist was a big, big man.

In the Judean desert, where the wild wind blows
Just a whole lot of sand and nothing that grows
A prophet came preaching for the people to repent
And no one doubted he was heaven sent
Big John, Big John, Big Bad John
He pulled no punches, no favorites did he play
He told the religious leaders get ready for the judgment day
When Herod played tricky with his brother’s wife
John called him out though it cost him his life
Big John, Big John, Big Bad John
When it came time for those four gospels to write
The story of Jesus and his truth and light
Those writers were certain to make it clear
It was John the Baptist’s voice those crowds came to hear
There was no mistake John was part of God’s plan
Cause out in the desert stood a Big, Big Man,
Big John, Big John, Big Bad John

The importance of John the Baptist in each one of the gospel accounts cannot be understated. John the Baptist is included for a purpose. One way to look at the role of John the Baptist is to say, “If John was Big John...then think how big Jesus is.” Maybe along the lines, John was 9 feet tall, but Jesus was a head taller, a full ten feet. Now that’s big. But even if Jesus was bigger than John, the inclusion of John could spark confusion. Who should we follow? Big John or Big Jesus? What people saw with Big John out in the desert was apparently enough for many in the crowd to put their money on Big John. That very thing happened according to the gospel of Luke. As people watched and listened to this Big Man named John the Baptist, they all began to wonder in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. Talk about the potential for confusion.

And yet no matter how big John the Baptist is, each of the four gospels makes clear that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew’s gospel begins, “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah...” Here is what Mark has to say. “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah...” Luke has his own way of letting us know who Jesus is. The angel Gabriel tells Mary, “You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all go beyond simply calling Jesus Messiah. They let us know Jesus is the Son of God.

John himself makes clear that he is not the Messiah. In Luke when the crowds begin to think John might be the Messiah, we hear John saying, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:15,16) John’s recognition that he himself was not the Messiah is evident when Jesus comes to John in the desert, seeking to be baptized. John tries to deter Jesus from being baptized, telling Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

This morning I want to point out something that might be new to you. You probably know there are four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What might be new to you is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow a common pattern in how the gospel is presented. They are

each different, each including unique details and omitting others, but in general, they present a fairly uniform rendering of the gospels. Because of this, the three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are called the Synoptics, which means they see things in a very similar way. John's gospel is not included in the Synoptics. John's gospel presents the story of Jesus in a way that sets it apart from the synoptics. I tell you that because for the next several months we are going to look at the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospel of John.

This morning, we have an example of how John's Gospel presents a different view of things, in this case the way the Gospel of John presents John the Baptist. The opening verses of the Gospel of John are ripe with meaning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all human beings. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:1-4) We will soon find out that Word that was with God in the beginning is revealed to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. John's gospel tells us the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Then we meet John the Baptist. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

Jesus is the light. John the Baptist is a witness to the light. His sole purpose is to testify concerning the light, so that through his testimony all people might believe. That is the Gospel of John's unique way of telling us who John is, what John's purpose is, and who Jesus is. The synoptic gospels, the gospels that see things together, they all turn to the passage in Isaiah that tells of a day when there will be, "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" These accounts of John the Baptist are not in contradiction. In their own way, both the Synoptics and the Gospel of John tell us the role of John the Baptist was to prepare the way and point

to Jesus. The Gospel of John's way is to say, "He came as a witness to testify concerning the light."

Our passage of scripture this morning, beginning with John 1:19, tells us about the testimony of John the Baptist. "Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'"

He might be Big John, but he is not the Messiah. John himself says so in no uncertain terms. "I am not the Messiah."

"They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' 'No.'"

Finally, they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (Notice the similarity here in how John the Baptist describes himself, that same voice crying in the wilderness we heard in the Synoptics)

"Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, nor the Prophet?'"

"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (Again, very similar to the synoptics)

But then John's Gospel gives us a view of Jesus that we do not get from the Synoptics. It is a view that is absolutely beautiful, even in its tragic context. In each one of the gospels, John the Baptist points to Jesus. On this they all agree. And yet it is only in John's Gospel that we find this next amazing, poignant, and powerful testimony

"The next day John (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'" (John 1:29) Here in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we are presented with an image of Jesus that evokes the suffering and the passion that Jesus will endure. At the same time, these words also proclaim the precious promise that through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, the sin of the world will be taken away.

For the next several months we are going to look at the life of Jesus as presented to us in the Gospel of John. What better invitation could God give to us to commit ourselves fully to this exploration in faith, than to show us God's own Beloved Son, the Word of God who was with God and who is God, the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, what better invitation could God give us to commit ourselves fully to this exploration of faith, than to show us Jesus and to say these words about him, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?" John the Baptist was a Big, Big Man, but he never stood taller, he never rose higher, he never attained a greater spiritual summit, than when he looked at Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Maybe the image of the Lamb of God who takes away the world was running through the mind of the one who wrote, "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old cross, where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown." If you don't find it in the first verse, listen to the second. "O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me; for the dear Lamb of God left his glory above to bear it to dark Calvary. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown."

Another hymn weaves together brilliantly the themes of the man of sorrows, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 with the Lamb of God. Man of sorrows what a name for the Son of God who came Ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah, what a Savior Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood Sealed my pardon with his blood; Hallelujah, what a Savior Guilty, vile and sinners we, Spotless Lamb of God was he; Full atonement can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior. Lifted up was he to die, "It is finished" was his cry Now in heaven exalted high, Hallelujah, what a Savior.

When someone beholds the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, they have captured the heart and the soul of the gospel. One night on a mission trip more than thirty years ago, a young high school student was overcome with the sacrifice, with the self-offering of God's Son, the Lamb of God, that sacrifice and offering that took away the sin of the world. Our day was drawing to a close, we were all filled with a powerful sense of God's peace and presence, and as our time that night drew to a close, this beautiful young child of God lifted her head and sang with what could have been the voice of an angel

He paid a debt he did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay, I needed someone to take my sins away

And now I sing a brand-new song, Amazing Grace, all day long, Christ Jesus paid a debt, a debt he did not owe

Hymns of this nature, and so many more, run through our mind when we hear John the Baptist point to Jesus and say, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

I had a little fun in this sermon with the Big John song, borrowing freely from the classic of the same title sung by Jimmy Dean. But I do not want you to leave thinking about Big John. I want you to leave thinking about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's how Big John the Baptist would have wanted it. In yet another unique passage in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist says about Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease." Thank you, Big John, for being a witness to the light, for being a witness to the light of the world known as Jesus Christ. Thank you, Big John, for showing us the Lamb of God, for surely Jesus alone takes away the sin of the world. Our closing song is titled, "Your Only Son." It is also known by the name, "The Lamb of God."