

Introductory

Matthew (3:1-12), Mark (1:1-8), and John (1:6-8, 19-28) give us much of the same information that Luke gives us here, and some of their information given by the first two synopsists very closely parallels that of this, the third. Luke, who began his Gospel by telling us that he will take the approach of the historian, gives us a lot of secular information that Matthew and Mark leave out. All three writers quote the Isaiah text; Matthew's quotation is the shortest, Mark's is longer, and Luke's is the longest.

While Matthew and Mark are very much interested in the appearance and location of John the Baptizer, Luke mentions none of that material. Matthew and Luke are specific as to the message that John is proclaiming, but Mark leaves it out completely. Still on the content of John's message, Luke (10-14) exclusively records a short conversation with the masses that begins with their question, "What shall we do?" and the same question is then asked of John by tax collectors and soldiers.

Luke alone (15-16) records that at this time some of the people wondered whether John might be the Christ, and then all three writers have John talking about the nature of his baptizing, and that One is coming after him who will be greater than him. Matthew and Luke include John's saying about the winnowing fork, fire, and upcoming judgment, and in Luke that talk is followed by the report of John being tossed into prison by Herod.

John 1:19-28 is the reading appointed for Advent 3 in the TLH one-year lectionary. The newer hymnals move John the Baptizer from Advent 3, to Advent 2, except that on year B only, he is left on Advent 3 on year B in the form of John's Gospel. In LW, Matthew 3:1-12, Mark 1:1-8, and Luke (3:1-6 only) texts are appointed to be read in Series A, B, and C, and John 1:1-6, 19-28 is appointed for Advent 3B. LSB has the same readings for the same days, but as we can see includes the longer Luke reading.

I'm not sure why we moved John in the Wilderness up one week from its historical location in the lectionary.

Good exegesis dictates that, since Luke is taking a historical tack in his telling of the escapades of John the Baptizer, we ought to follow suit during this C year. A good exegete should be, among other things, a good historian. The premise of the historico-grammatical method of exegesis used by orthodox readers of the Bible is that we know the historical context in which these events and sayings took place, and understand the meaning of those sayings and events to those people in that time and that place. Only after that can we understand and communicate their meaning to modern hearers.

Probably you did not even notice the two metaphors in the first sentence of that last paragraph. Listeners to sermons do not generally notice when figures of speech are used from the pulpit, they just know that the guy who is talking is easy on the ears, and they can listen to and understand him. The first metaphor, to “take a tack,” is a sailing term, and the second, to “follow suit,” is a term used by card players. The listener does not even necessarily have to know the origin of terms like that, because they have heard them before and they know what they mean. Those particular metaphors have become idiom.

Textual Notes

1. Did we mention that Luke is taking a historical tack in his Gospel? This verse firmly plants the ministry of John in a particular and very specific historical context. There are people who think that Luke does this for apologetic reasons, to assert to the reader the veracity and actual reality of people like John and Jesus, and that these things actually did take place, and I am probably one of those people. As you know, there are other people these days who say that none of this ever happened, and that’s nothing new.

From the very beginning, unbelievers have doubted that Jesus was born of a woman who had not known a man, and they said that to His face. The response to the report that He had risen from the dead was responded to by the religious leaders with bribes and a cover up. When Paul makes his great and classic resurrection apologia in 1 Cor. 15, we cannot help but perceive that his words were directed at those who questioned the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Perhaps this should be a year for apologia for us?

Luke starts at the top; the first historical figure mentioned by him is “Tiberius Caesar,” saying that John began what John does in the fifteenth year of his reign.

2. He now connects the work of John to church leaders. Again beginning at the top, he mentions that “Annas” and “Caiaphas” were high priests at this time. You can look these people up on the Internet to see when they were doing what they were doing.

At that time, Luke tells us, the “Word of God came into John – ἐγένετο ῥῆμα θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἰωάννην.” The verb is the aorist form of “γίνομαι,” a verb of being or origin, and this is a simple, one-time act. The prepositional phrase has the preposition “ἐπὶ” followed by a noun in the accusative case; motion into¹. The picture painted here has the Word of God actually entering into the person of John, and as we will soon see, that same Word will make its exit out of his mouth.

John is further identified as the son of Zecharia, who has already figured prominently in Luke’s Gospel, being one of the main characters of a long (80 vv.) chapter one. If it seems redundant to mention what may seem obvious, think about yourself getting an unidentified text from somebody who identifies himself as “John.” I know a lot of people named John. If I get a text from “Reed,” then I know who that is, but which John is it?

John was a common name, and as we see with the biblical “Marys,” the occurrences of common names can easily confuse us.

Luke places John “in the wilderness – ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ,” John (3:23) is more specific, saying that John’s work took place “in Aenon near Salim – ἐν Αἰνῶν ἐγγὺς τοῦ Σαλείμ,” and giving as a reason for that location, “because there was lots of water there – ὅτι ὕδατα πολλὰ ἦν ἐκεῖ.”

3. Luke tells us that John was more ambulatory than he was stationary; that he “went into the area all around (περίχωρος) the Jordan.” Working with the Jordan River location as home base, John ventured from there with his message. The adjective “περίχωρος” is non-specific; it does not tell us exactly *how* far John ventured. In his going, as he went, he “was proclaiming a baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sins – κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.”

The word translated “was proclaiming” is a present participle, connecting the doer to the action. In John’s case particularly the man’s identity was very much wrapped up in his preaching activity, in the same way as a pastor’s identity as a person is very much connected to his being ordained, and like it or not, to his preaching. John is preaching, and the content of that preaching is said to be such things as; baptism, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins. We likewise should talk about those things from our pulpits.

A lot of books have been written by a lot of really smart people about the distinctions and connections between these two baptisms. I also said a lot about it in the notes on Advent 2B. Much of what is said is not really of interest to the people in the pew, nor should it be. Make any such discussion both short and sweet. Christian Baptism is made Christian by the words that Jesus gave us to say; we baptize in the name of the Triune God.

We have no reason to believe that John’s baptism was in the name of the Trinity, because there isn’t really anything to suggest that, but certainly his was a precursor to the coming Trinitarian Baptism. John’s baptism does not mean nothing, but it means something, and looking at the book of Acts, it seems to be the coming of the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost that elevates baptism to a life-giving thing. (See the attached notes from Advent 2B for a more complete discussion of that.) Note that in v. 16, John makes the addition of the Holy Spirit the thing that distinguishes his baptism from that of Jesus.

He is preaching that people should be baptized, a general term for washing with water. The term is, in fact, much like our verb “to wash.” Depending upon what I’m washing, I will use different modes of washing, often identified by more specific words. Take a look at the nozzle on the end of your garden hose to see some of the washing with water options the nozzle gives to you. Think about how you wash your laundry, and your wood floors, and your dishes, and yourself for examples of different modes of washing.

If you want to briefly mention that in this or another sermon, and note immersion as one of several types of washing that are identified by the word “βάπτισμα,” your people might appreciate that, and be able to use it the next time a misguided Christian tells her

that she hasn't *really* been baptized until she's been immersed. If you want to quote Mark 7:4, where the word is connected to clearly non-immersible items, but not in the NIV, that would be good too.

And speaking of immersion, John would not have to wander very far from the Jordan River to be in places where there was not enough water to immerse, and yet as he goes and proclaims, it seems that he is still baptizing. While it does not say that he was baptizing when he was going about proclaiming baptism, how does one proclaim a "baptism into repentance for the forgiveness of sins" and then not offer such baptism – one that would have to have been by sprinkling or pouring, not by immersion – to the hearers?

John's Baptism is a baptism "of repentance," or a change. Exactly what kind of a change is here being demanded or given? The change that is being demanded is that we see and acknowledge our lost condition and our utter inability to do anything about it. The change that is being given is that God causes us to confess that condition and to trust in Jesus, not self, for salvation, which comes about not by our good works, but by His forgiveness of our bad works; sin. The person who becomes a Christian is a person who is changed.

Such is the meaning of a baptism of repentance "into the forgiveness of sins," a prepositional phrase that contains a preposition followed by a noun (forgiveness) in the accusative case, motion into. Employing Occam's Razor and FGG on this verse, the simplest way to understand this phrase is to picture the person being taken into a room of holiness – there is no sin in that room – and now dwelling there forever. Such a room is not entered by our checking sin at the door – we are incapable – but of sin being constantly forgiven. Only in heaven will we experience the absolute absence of sin.

4 – 5. The synoptics all point out that what John is doing had been prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5. Mark says that John was "crying out," and if you look at the twelve occurrences of that verb (βοάω) in the NT, you will note that the word describes one speaking with a certain degree of passion or emotion. Our preaching ought to be passionate, a passion that comes from knowing that we speak the truth, and that what we say is important; what can be more important than God, and we want the hearer to likewise believe what we say.

John is an impassioned "voice crying in the wilderness – φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου – prepare the Lord's road." There is some discussion as to whether "the wilderness" refers to the location of John's preaching, or to the place where the Lord will be coming. Grammatically, either is correct, and practically speaking both events took place in the wilderness. The command to "prepare – ἐτοιμάσατε" is an aorist imperative, focus on the action, and the action is to make straight the way for the Lord.

When talking about preparing a road for a coming dignitary in first century Palestine, we can put on our Roadologist hats and talk about the dearth of actual roads in those days and the sorry state of the few roads that were. I will probably talk like that, and then maybe I'll talk about going out to cut wood in the woods, and how there used to be a "wood road" through that forest, and you could get a pickup in there, and before I can get

in with the Ranger, I have to do some work on that road, which sounds like a story and gives the listener something much more concrete than 1st century Palestine.

6. We around these parts were probably tired of the last presidential campaign before a lot of people. Iowa is a swing state, and it seemed like once or twice every week one of the candidates would land at the airport in Moline and motorcade across the river for a campaign stop. If locals like me saw Air Force One parked at the east end of the airport, we knew that delays or worse may be in the cards on that day, because the way that we “prepare the way” for dignitaries these days is to close off roads. Doing that requires time and manpower and inconvenience, but you do it because of the person.

It was hard work in the time of Jesus to prepare the road for the coming dignitary, harder than clearing brush and tree branches for the coming Ranger, but you did it to honor that person. If we so prepare the way for our President, and if they so prepared the way for their Kings, how much more should the road be prepared for the one who brings with Him “the salvation of God – τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ,” Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, which means “savior.” There may be implications here for the way a Christian approaches Divine Service, where we will be greeting the Savior Jesus.

7. The coming of Jesus means different things to different people. This verse begins with “Ἐλεγεν οὖν – therefore he was saying...” The conjunction “οὖν – therefore” generally points back to what has just been said as a premise for, or basis of understanding, what is about to be said. It is *because* of John’s identity as a purveyor of a baptism of repentance that he must say what he says to these unrepentant people who are streaming into the wilderness to hear him, and more to the point, it is *because* John is the mouthpiece who proclaims the coming of the Savior, that John must say what John says to these men.

Faithful pastors and teachers likewise are the mouthpieces of God, and we must say things that are hard, as well as things that are easy. It could not have been easy for John to have spoken the way that he is about to speak to his religious leaders, educated and spiritual men who were generally held in high standing in the community. What John is doing here, and what Jesus also does, flies in the face of much of modern conventional Christian wisdom; don’t say negative things to or about religious, spiritual, educated people. Well, so much for conventional modern Christian wisdom.

They just want to be baptized, and John starts calling them names, and they aren’t nice names. We talked about these people a few weeks ago – the incident involving a widow and a small coin – and how they liked to be respectfully greeted and deferred to in public. That’s not the way John rolls. He sees coming a crowd of people, identified more specifically by Matthew as “many of the Scribes and Pharisees,” and says that they descend from “ἐχιδνῶν – venomous snakes” an idiomatic saying was used in that time and place to refer to false teachers.

I would have questions about who they really are. The unrepentant refused baptism, according to Jesus later during holy week, but the repentant came to be baptized. It seems the snakes are the same “crowds” who came to get baptized and continue the conversation in v 10. To be clear, Luke doesn't show that John made any distinctions between believers and unbelievers in the audience of this sermon. He only mentions some particular groups that received him. If I'm right, there may be some implications about how to preach Law (2nd use) even to Christians. (Seminarian Collin Duling)

The false teachings of the Sadducees, as noted by Paul as recorded by Luke in Acts (23:8), included rejecting resurrection, angels, and the Holy Spirit. The main problem of the Pharisees lay in their deeds rather than their creeds, but we also note that their notably correct doctrine all comes to naught with their rejection of Jesus as the Christ, hard evidence that they didn't really believe some very basic teachings of their religion. By the very fact of their coming, however, there must have been an interest in, or at least a curiosity about John, his message, and his baptism.

After he calls them the offspring of snakes, he rhetorically asks them, “who warned you to flee from the coming wrath – τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς?” The rhetorical answer is that the OT prophets warned them of the coming wrath. He seems to be making the point that these men full well know that judgment will come, and yet their lives are lived in such a way that they don't seem to fear or even to acknowledge that coming judgment. That's the Law, and in that regard, these men are like all men.

8. More Law, as He commands them to “ποιήσατε οὖν καρποὺς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας – do, therefore, fruits worthy of repentance.” If they are so concerned about the wrath to come that they are coming to him to be baptized, then they should repent of their sins, which John's words indicate they are not, in fact, doing. He seems to know where these men are going to go with this, probably because he knows them, just like a father of a teenager often knows what is coming out of the adolescent pie hole before the verbal projectile has even been chambered, let alone fired.

Their argument is going to be an appeal to pedigree, that they are descendants of Abraham, and before they can even go there, John launches a pre-emptive strike, telling them just how impressed God is with that; if He wants to, The God Who made Adam out of dust can easily “out of the stones raise up descendents to Abraham – ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγείραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ,” a very comforting Gospel message for us. We Christians are the true descendants of Abraham, Jesus and Paul say, and He has reached our hearts of stone with His Holy Spirit, making “willing hearts out of unwilling.”

9. He continues with the metaphor about the axe being laid at the root of the trees, and the trees are clearly they. He then points out that you cut down dead trees and throw them into the fire. When I go out to cut wood, I cut dead trees, and I don't cut alive trees, and I can hardly imagine taking the chain saw to fruit tree that is still bearing fruit. But once

the tree stops producing fruit, a very good sign that the tree is dead or dying, the only use for it is to burn it. People like us burn wood for heat, and occasionally cook, and people like them would have burned wood for cooking, and rarely for heat.

The shoot from the root of Jesse has produced the wonderful fruit of Messiah, and is dead or dying, to be replaced by the religion of that Messiah, the fulfillment of the old religion of the OT. Jesus will say similar things using old and new wineskins as a metaphor for the old and the new, and talking about a new covenant. He will also notably curse the fig tree in Jerusalem on Holy Week and engage in that brutal conversation, the one about true religion, the one that John records in the eighth chapter of his Gospel.

10. The response of people here to this preaching of the Law is a lot like the response of people at Pentecost when Peter preached the Law, “What, therefore, shall we do – τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν?” We note the presence of οὖν, making clear what was already crystal clear; based on what John has just said; they want to know what they should do. They seem to be what we would call repentant sinners. They seem to be asking what good work they need to do (ποιήσωμεν) to be bearing those fruits of repentance that he had demanded, and John answers in kind.

11. He directly answers their question by telling them what kinds of things people who are repentant of their sins will be doing. He tells them to share, and he specifically tells them to share clothing and food, two essentials that Americans have too much of, and over the years the Christians have been pretty good about doing just that. Some Christian countries have even passed laws that take things like money from citizens, whether they like it or not, and giving that money to others who don’t have as much as them, and the recipients can use that money to buy clothing and food. They can and do also use that money to buy beer, cigarettes, DVDs and the like.

12 – 13. Up to this point, the conversation had been with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now an entirely new group comes to John for the very same reason they had come; to be baptized by John. Calling John “teacher διδάσκαλε,” they ask the same question of John, “τί ποιήσωμεν – what should we do?” to bear the fruits of repentance. He tells them, who in their line of work are accustomed to routinely take more money than is owed, not to do that anymore. A wee little tax collector, who met Jesus, later went even farther than that.

14. Now come the soldiers, and although it does not say that they were there to be baptized by John, why else would they be there? You already know that the Roman Legions were occupying Palestine, and any soldier mentioned in the NT is likely a member of that group. They may have been from the small, mercenary army of Herod “The King,” which soldiers would be at the beck and call of the Roman commanders.

The one commonality between almost all soldiers in that place at that time was that both of those armies were made up almost exclusively of Gentiles from many different ethnic groups. Those who have so far responded to John’s message include: the most religious of the religious; the Pharisees, the theological liberals; the Sadducees, tax collectors who

are Jewish but collaborate with Rome, and a potpourri of non-Jews from the four corners of the earth. The Christians are not opposed to, and in fact invented racial tolerance.

What kinds of fruits should a soldier produce? John tells them “μηδένα διασείσητε – intimidate nobody.” The verb is a hapax in the NT, and it means to intimidate with the threat of violence, like Simon of Cyrene was intimidated when that soldier laid the blade of his spear on his shoulder and asked him if he wanted to carry That Guy’s cross. He tells the soldiers “μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε – not defraud.” The verb can also mean “to wrongfully accuse,” but that seems like a less likely thing for a soldier to do.

Finally, “ἀρκεῖσθε τοῖς ὀψωνίοις ὑμῶν – be content with your wages,” which were notoriously miserably low. None of the things that John tells these people to do are really at all extraordinary. In summary, he simply tells them to keep doing their respective vocations, and to act like Christians in those vocations. When Christians these days want to know what kinds of good works they should be doing, there you go! When you have become a perfect father, mother, soldier, dentist, student, citizen, or trash collector, then come back to me and we’ll talk some more.

(15-20). John is a good talker, and he doesn’t smoke, drink, or chew, or run with girls who do, but John is no Jesus, and there’s really no good reason why people should think that John is the Christ, but some of them at least allow for the possibility. In excellent pastoral fashion, John quickly squashes those thoughts, lowering self and elevating Him. The Christ, John says, will with a metaphorical pitchfork clear off the metaphorical threshing floor, burning chaff and saving wheat.

The separating of the wheat from the chaff is called “εὐηγγελίζετο – preaching the Gospel” by Luke. We may take the meaning of “Gospel” to be in the wider sense of the entire body of teaching of Jesus, including both Law and Gospel, or in the sense of “Gospel” as good news. This separating will indeed be good news for the wheat, but not so much for the chaff. But not all were so enamored by the John and Jesus religion. Herod was so unenamored that he threw John into prison, and later had him beheaded.

Law/Gospel

Vipers/Children – By nature we are included among those who need to flee from the wrath to come. By the work of God in Holy Baptism, we have become something more and better; children of God.

Chaff/Wheat – You may have to explain those terms to city folk and to the young. Chaff is worthless – well, I suppose it could be composted – fit only to be destroyed. Wheat is valuable, highly regarded, and useful.

Sermon Titles

Snakes Fleeing the Fire

John Speaks Crossly to Religious People

Wildfire in the Wilderness

Hymns

Sing Advent Hymns, and especially hymns where John is mentioned, during Advent Season. It is liturgically illegal to sing Christmas songs during the Advent Season.

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