

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin  
December 11, 2016

## The Way It Was: John the Baptist A Voice in the Wilderness Doing Heart-Work

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

[Pastor Pete is standing at the back of the church, with a scraggly wig and fake beard. He is wearing torn jeans, no shoes, and a T-shirt that says “renegade pastor’s network” on it. He is walking up the aisle repeating these words.]

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! ... 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.”

[Pastor turns to the congregation and speaks directly to the congregation.]

When you look at me, you are probably thinking: “What a rebel! Your father would be so ashamed!” We are opposites in nearly every way.

As a priest, my father kept his hair trimmed. You can see mine has never been cut.

As a priest, my father wore beautiful clothes, carefully cleaned. Mine are the rags of an ancient prophet.

As a priest, my father served in God’s presence in the temple itself. I am out in the wilderness.

But I am not rebelling against my father. My call is the very opposite. I am “to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). My call is heart-work, focusing especially on the family. God called me to lead parents to think about how they are influencing their children for good or for evil, and to lead children to look to their parents and consider if they are following a godly example or not.

I’m not a rebel against my father Zechariah. My heart was turned to follow him in service of my God. But my service was to be that of Nazarite, specially dedicated to God. Everyone can see that dedication in that I have never cut my hair. My service was not to be a priest, but to go forth in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah, preparing people for God’s coming. My service was not to be in the temple, but to be God’s voice in the wilderness. Here, in the wilderness, is where God has done his greatest heart-work throughout Old Testament history. And with the Messiah coming, it is here in the wilderness that I serve as God’s voice to work on human hearts.

First of all, **I am God’s voice to break hearts.**

“Repent!” This is a simple word that means to be sorry for what you have done.

Most of my hearers could understand this call. They readily admitted that they had sinned. Many of you are in that state too. You come here, in your church, and immediately you begin to confess your sin: "I confess that I am by nature sinful."

None of us fully understands that. God's judgment after the flood seems too harsh, "Every inclination of a person's heart is evil from childhood" (Genesis 8:21). We may see that we have done a few things wrong, but God sees that we have done nothing truly right. Isaiah's words strike my heart: "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

I am not here to lord it over you and say, "Your heart is bad," as though mine is good. No, I come in these ragged clothes to admit to you that I too am not worthy to come into God's presence.

"Repent!" Come with me and humbly admit the big sins... you and I don't fear God above all things. We don't trust in God above all things. We don't love God above all things. Every other sin flows from that. "I confess that I am by nature sinful."

But sadly, some people who came out to me in the wilderness did not see their sins. So, as Jeremiah says, I had to use God's word like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29). If you, like the Pharisees, think highly of yourself, beware. The ax is at the root of the trees. The coming of the Messiah at the last day will reveal that you are unprepared for his coming because you are trusting in your own goodness. Join us, the broken-hearted, and confess your sins.

But I'm not out in the wilderness simply to break hearts. I'm here primarily to heal hearts.

### **I am God's Voice to Heal Hearts.**

There had been baptisms or washings in the Old Testament. But I had instruction from God to institute a new washing. By walking down into the Jordan River, a person was confessing his sin and his need that someone else take the burden of his or her sin and guilt. It was called "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

The highlight of my baptizing ministry was the day that the Messiah came down to be baptized. I tried to convince him that he should baptize me. I am the sinful one. I knew that "in him was no sin" (1 John 3:5). So why should he receive "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"? It made no sense to me. But he insisted.

As I thought about what happened that day, I gradually came to understand that Jesus was the Lamb of God. My father Zechariah had served at the temple when people came in with a sin offering. They would place their hands on the head of an animal and confess their sin. They were transferring their guilt and the punishment of death for sin to that animal. Then my father would help him sacrifice the animal. The animal died in place of the sinner.

Why did Jesus receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Because he came for each of us, by faith, to lay our hands upon his head, and transfer our guilt and the sentence of death upon his head. There in the waters of the Jordan River, I was baptizing the man who was carrying the guilt of the entire world. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was entering into his ministry to die for my sins and yours.

When he came up out of the water, something fantastic happened. It was like heaven tore open, and a dove came down on Jesus, and I heard God the Father speak these words, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

I realized that if Jesus is the Lamb of God who took my place, then the words that the Father spoke to Jesus, he was also speaking to everyone claimed Jesus as the Lamb of God who would die for him.

After that, when I baptized people, I remembered these words: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” I began to tell every person who was baptized, “In this baptism, God the Father is also saying to you, “You are my son or my daughter. I love you. I am well pleased with you.”

I can tell you that those words brought healing to my heart. Standing in Jesus’ presence, I knew my sins. But I had been baptized too. And so have you! Receive this healing. The Lamb of God took your place under the judgment of sin. Your baptism is God’s healing touch upon your heart. Every day, hear again the words he spoke to you on your baptism: “You are my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.”

Some people think that this forgiveness comes too easy, that there has to be something that we do to get that forgiveness. But there is nothing you need to do other than believe this promise. But when you do believe it, it changes everything. A question rises in your heart. How can I serve God?

### **I am the Voice of God to Instruct Hearts**

Suddenly people were looking for instruction. What should we do? “The man who tunic should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Generosity is a mark of a believer. When we believe that God gave his Son for us as the Lamb of God, then we want to be like God and be generous too.

Soldiers asked, “What about us?” I told them, “Don’t extort money—be content with your pay.”

If you and I know that God is with us, we can be confident that he will give us what we need. And so contentment is one of those marks of a believer.

Some people that day were surprised. I think they were expecting me to say that if you really believed then you had to become a Nazarite just like me. In fact, there were people who did make that mistake, thinking that real God-pleasing service was done only if you were a hermit. They thought they served God by going off into the desert.

God-pleasing work is done by those whose lives are dedicated to God in a special way like mine. Last week you heard my father talk about the importance of the public ministry in your day as well, that your church needs more pastors and teachers and staff ministers.

But most of the “church work” is done in your every-day life. At home especially! Do your children see you as someone who is generous? Do hear at the supper table that you are someone who is content? Remember, I came for heart-work, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

This is why, when I instruct people, I like to remind them that just as the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus in the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit came down on you in your baptism. The Holy Spirit is

working powerfully in you to help you change to be that a generous, content father and mother. The Holy Spirit is working in you children so that you see the sincere faith in your parents' hearts and want to be like them.

### **I am God's Voice to Encourage Hearts**

I thoroughly enjoyed my ministry, but it didn't last long. I served for just over a year and then got into trouble with the king. I was sent to break hard hearts. So I called him to repentance for breaking up his brother's marriage and marrying his sister-in-law. I got locked up for that.

At first it wasn't hard to take. After all, the Messiah had begun his ministry and soon he would arise in power and might and I would be released.

But it didn't happen that way. Instead, I languished in prison. I am human just like you, and when I began to see that I was going to die in prison, I began to have questions in my mind. I sent some of my followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come?"

He pointed me back to Isaiah 35 and how he was fulfilling the prophecies. The lame walked. The dead were raised. The good news of forgiveness and eternal life was being preached to the broken-hearted.

That gave me courage the day that the soldier came with the platter. I could face death in confidence. So you can you. Go back and claim again Jesus as the Messiah. Read the signs. And know that not even death can separate you from God's love in Christ Jesus.

Here is that soldier now. I have an appointment with the executioner. But my heart has been encouraged. As one of your hymn writers says:

What harm can sin and death then do?  
The true God now abides with you.  
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,  
Christ is your brother—you are safe.

You shall and must at last prevail.  
God's own you are; you cannot fail.  
To God forever sing your praise  
With joy and gladness all your days.

With confidence I go to meet my executioner... and my Savior. Carry on my work for me will you. You too are dedicated to God's service. You are living in a spiritual wilderness too. You are called to be God's voice, called to do the heart-work. Break hearts. Heal hearts. Instruct hearts. Encourage hearts. Farewell.

prepared by Pastor Peter Panitzke  
414-422-0320 ext. 122, [ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org](mailto:ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org)