

Sermon for January 24, 2010

Text: Matthew 11:1-19

8:30am, 9:16am, 11:00am

Title: "Journeys of Faith -John the Baptizer"

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Main Point - Jesus is inviting us not to lose hope, but rather to join him in loving the world.

Text: Matthew 11:1-19 (The Message)

¹**When Jesus finished placing this charge before his twelve disciples**, he went on to teach and preach in their villages. ²⁻³John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?" ⁴⁻⁶Jesus told them, "Go back and tell John what's going on:

The blind see,

The lame walk,

Lepers are cleansed,

The deaf hear,

The dead are raised,

The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

"Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!"

⁷⁻¹⁰**When John's disciples left to report**, Jesus started talking to the crowd about John. "What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That's right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you'll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, *'I'm sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.'*

¹¹⁻¹⁴**Let me tell you what's going on here:** No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him. For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God's kingdom. But if you read the books of the Prophets and God's Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom. Looked at in this way, John is the 'Elijah' you've all been expecting to arrive and introduce the Messiah.

¹⁵"Are you listening to me? Really listening?"

¹⁶⁻¹⁹**How can I account for this generation?** The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, 'We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.' John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff. Opinion polls don't count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

Introduction

News has not been good lately... devastating earthquakes in Haiti, the stock market dropping, and serious health care reform at a stalemate. When I add to that all the people I know who are suffering illnesses, fighting cancer, are still unemployed, and in tough situations, I can become overwhelmed, discouraged, and begin to lose hope. John the Baptizer was in such a situation. He had spent his life getting people ready for God and now he was in jail and his life was in danger. What was happening? Where was the Messiah who was going to turn things upside down? What was Jesus doing? Did John get it wrong? In desperation, John sends his disciples to Jesus to find out what is going on. Jesus sent word back to John that the things that Scripture had predicted were happening. The blind see. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side. In essence Jesus tells John, "Don't lose hope, God is at work".

I received this email last week from someone who has not lost hope. It read:

Pastor Hackett,

***This is e-mail is from Shawn Weaver,** a member at First Presbyterian Church (son of Brad and Julie Weaver, brother of Michelle Weaver). I have been a member for as long as I can remember at the church and have attended when I am in Lancaster. I got confirmed at First Presbyterian Church and attended a few of the retreats and even mission trips through the youth group. I am not sure if you remember, but I broke my back about five years ago and you came to my house to pray with my father and I in our kitchen. I have moved to Maryland now because that is where I was able to find a job.*

***My girlfriend, Kellianne,** whom I met 2 and a half years ago in Maryland at college had a major accident on September 20th. She was at her brother's wedding out in Oregon when she went for a hike with a friend and she fell off a cliff. She fell 25 feet onto some boulders landing on her head. Her friend was able to notify emergency responders through the GPS device on a phone. They responded to the location to realize that they needed more people because she had fallen at such force that she was trapped between a few boulders. They eventually got her out and back to the top of the cliff. She was transferred to a local hospital before being transferred by helicopter to a trauma unit where she remained for the next two weeks. When the responders got to her she was given a 2% chance of surviving and they said they had never seen anyone survive from falling off of these cliffs. Her face was completely destroyed; her skin peeled off, lost teeth, shattered cheek bone, jaw and chin were shattered. She broke both arms and shattered one of her hands. Kelli broke 7 ribs, lacerated her liver, bruised her lungs, and suffered a brain injury. She went through extensive surgeries that lasted about 20 hours. A doctor took the picture from her driver's license in attempts to completely reconstruct her face, which he did. She had over 1500 stitches on her face and head alone. Her legs were scrapped and bruised, but not broken at all. She has been recovering at home in NJ since. Physically she has made great strides, but her brain injury has affected her short-term memory and her emotions. I am lucky to have every Saturday off and have been able to travel to see her almost every week.*

I am asking you to please add her to your prayers because she has already overcome the odds in surviving, but I wish for her brain to fully heal as well. A graduate student and I are also going to be hosting a 5K and fun run in Maryland in the spring for fundraising for Kelli. Due to the extent of her injury and the cost, insurance is only going to pay for 10% of her costs. This has really affected her family because the bills have really begun to pile up. The money is second to her recovery of course, but we were hoping that some members would come and run or maybe donate to our cause. My e-mail address is wsoccer25@aol.com . Please keep Kelli in your prayers and I will let you know when this run will be. Also, let me know if I can get you any other information. Thanks again for everything. Shawn Weaver

How to Hang on to Hope

Jesus is saying the same to us today, don't lose hope. Jesus is inviting us not lose hope, but to join him in serving the world. I think the life of John gives us cues how to not lose hope, but rather to join Jesus in loving the world.

1. Step One to Hope: Get Focused

John was raised in a simple Jewish home in the hill country of Judea. He grew up and lived in the desert, and there he launched his ministry (*Luke 1:80*). John was a wilderness man, dressed in rough camelhair and leather, eating the food of the land like locusts and wild honey. He lived simply, without many distractions. There, John was able to hear God speak.

How do you and I hear God speak? Most of us cannot move out to the wilderness. How do we discern the voice of God in our daily, busy lives?

1. Pray, all the time! When we wake up, at meals, as we walk or drive, before a meeting, quietly on our own, gathered praying with others, there are a thousand ways to stay connected to God every day.
2. Some people set the alarm on their phone or watch to remind them to stop and pray.
3. Others have daily devotions pop up on their computer screens (www.pcusa.org/devotions/).
4. Many in our use devotional guides like the Upper Room, Daily Bread, or THESE DAYS (<http://www.ppcbooks.com/thesedays.asp>) to help them slow down and listen to God.
5. In our foyer are copies of a new devotional book called, "God Stories 5", as well as copies of the devotional Bible, "Solo".

Commit yourself to a tool that will help you this year stay in close contact with God. That is our first step in finding hope.

2. Step Two to Hope: Listen and Respond

In the desert John listened, reflected, and began to speak. His words were not the type you would typically hear in the synagogue. John's words were fresh, abrasive, piercing the heart. As people came out to the desert to hear him, he let them have it. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In others words, John said, "*Turn from your empty, self-focused lives and focus on God. Allow God to reshape you, to re-create you as a child of God.*"

Repenting - Getting Ready for God

Friends, the same word applies to us. If we want God to work in and through us, we need to make ourselves completely available to listen and respond to the Spirit of God. When a person is under a strong influence of something else, like alcohol or drugs, it is difficult for God to use that person. He or she is not able to be responsive. If drinking is something you do more than occasionally, you may have a spiritual issue to confront.

Jesus wants to have direct and continual influence in our lives. He does not like to be pushed aside by alcohol, or drugs, or food, or money, or power, or lust, or pornography, or gambling, anger, or fear. You name it...if anything is having more influence in your life than our Lord Jesus, than there is a serious issue to address.

My observation is that we cannot tackle this alone. We need each other to deal with influences that have taken over our lives. There is a number of ways to get help:

1. Pray and call a friend. Invite your friends to be honest with you, "Is alcohol a problem in my life? I need to know." Ask them to meet you face to face so they can look you in the eye, hear your struggle, support you, pray for you and keep you accountable.
2. Our church has trained lay helpers who have been trained as Stephen Ministers. They volunteer their time to meet confidentially with individuals who are in transition, crisis, or need extra support. Contact Candee Buckbee for more detail on how it works and how to get set up.
3. You may need the support of a group like AA (Alcohol Anonymous), NA (Narcotics Anonymous), or OA (Overeaters Anonymous). There are websites like IN THE ROOMS.COM which can connect you with a local group. You may start your own group. Gather others together who want to work together on the issue of common concern and set up a regular time to listen, pray, read the Bible and set goals together.
4. Professional counseling is often needed in to help change bad habits and additive behavior. Check with you medical insurance coverage. More types of counseling are being covered these days. We have an excellent resource and partner in ministry with our friends at the Samaritan Counseling Center (www.scclanc.org) located just north of the city on the Oregon Pike. They are able to assist in a whole spectrum of needs and issues.

We are in a new year. Let us take a sober inventory of our lives. This is a new opportunity for change, for transformation for you and me. Old habits do not have to bind us anymore. Allow God to come and meet you in your struggle and lead you out to the freedom of a sober, balanced, healthy, joy-filled, Spirit-directed and empowered life.

3. Step Three to Hope: Stay Flexible and Keep Trusting

John was thrown into jail because he spoke out against the sins of the local ruler, King Herod. There he would later be executed. I am sure he did not understand all that God was doing. He knew his job was to get people ready for God's Chosen Messiah and that is what he focused on.

Shawn and Kelli are in the same boat of hope in turbulent waters. They are trying to stay flexible and trusting in a very difficult set of circumstances. May we continue to learn from them both. Here is what I wrote back to Shawn:

Hi Shawn,

Yes, I remember you and your family fondly. I am so sorry to hear about Kellianne. What an overwhelming situation she, her family, and you are in. We are honored to join you in prayer and I will send this on to our prayer team as well.

Here is my prayer:

Dear Jesus,

Thank you that you have been with Kellianne all along. You love her and delight in her. We lift Kellianne up to you and ask your grace, mercy, love, and healing would be fully released in and through her...especially in her brain.

In Jesus Name, Amen

Please keep us updated on how to pray and support you and her.

In Christ,

Don

Let us pray:

Lord, we come looking for hope...for Haiti, for our hurting friends, and for ourselves. Meet us at the beginning of this New Year with your compassion heart and your tangible help. Help us to hold onto you when everything shaking around us. Meet us with your Spirit of Comfort and Conviction for we want you forgive, cleanse and remold us. Lead us to freedom from addictions and poor habits, in to the land of hope and healing in Jesus Christ, we pray, in His Name. Amen.