The Gospel of John: The Forerunner
John 1:19-28

As we return to our journey through the Gospel of John, we now move on from John’s prologue. We now will begin John’s record of what Jesus did, said, and accomplished. But first, we will meet and hear from The Forerunner, John the Baptist. Let us stand and read John 1:19-28.

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” 22 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?” 23 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.”

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

My message will fall into four subheadings: 1) The Historical Context of John the Baptist and His Inquisitors; 2) Who the Baptist is NOT; 3) Who the Baptist is; and 4) Preparing the Way for the Gospel.

1. The Historical Context of John the Baptist and His Inquisitors

Our text this morning begins with this statement, “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” Before we hear John’s testimony, let us briefly consider the historical context of both John’s life prior to this moment as well as the team of “inquisitors” who have been commissioned to interrogate the Baptist.

We should begin with the work of Luke the historian who gives us a significant amount of background information about John’s parents and his birth in Luke 1. If you remember, Luke writes about John’s parents early on in Luke 1 where we learn that John’s father (Zechariah) was a priest with a lineage tracing back to Solomon and David. John’s mother (Elizabeth) was a descendant of the daughters of Aaron, making her a descendant of the high priests. John’s birth, like that of Jesus, was predicted and directly appointed by an angel of the Lord who appeared to Zechariah in the temple. Not unlike the prediction of Isaac’s birth to Abram and Sarai, the angel of the Lord declares that a child shall be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are old and beyond child-bearing years. Again, like Jesus and other great prophets in the Bible, John the Baptist is a “miracle child”…he has been appointed and “sent by God” to accomplish a specific role in God’s redemptive plan. The angel of the Lord tells Zechariah, “He shall be great before the Lord…he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb…he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him [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.”

Now, given the role of his father, Zechariah, we should assume that young John was raised as a “priest in the making,” spending considerable time in the Temple and synagogues where his father served as a priest. However, at some point, the young “preacher’s kid” became disillusioned with the spirit-less traditions of the Temple; to the degree that he walked away from
the path of priesthood and entered into the wilderness as a prophet, ministering “outside” the bounds of traditional Jewish roles and practices. We learn from Luke and the other Synoptic Gospels that John preached a powerful, convicting message of repentance even as he baptized people with a baptism of repentance (Luke 3). The Synoptics agree that John’s wilderness ministry was so powerful that huge crowds of people made their way into the wilderness to both hear his preaching and to submit to baptism. I will touch on his ministry of baptism again in just a moment.

Now, it’s difficult for us to discern how long John’s ministry lasted in the wilderness, but I suspect it was for several years. We know that the Baptist’s ministry came to an end when the ever-so-paranoid tetrarch, Herod, had him arrested and put safely into prison so as to squash his growing influence. The Baptist is eventually beheaded by Herod due to the plotting of Herod’s infamous and scandalous wife, Herodias, as we read about in Matthew 14.

I think we can assume that Jesus was a quiet observer of John’s ministry, maybe even for several years, all the while concealing His true identity from His cousin until the day of His baptism that is recorded in Matthew 3. All the gospels agree that the Baptist came “before Christ” in terms of his ministry and influence, even though the two men were just months apart in terms of age (Luke 1). All of this makes sense because, as we’ll see often in John’s Gospel, Jesus was very sensitive to the timing of His Father, such that Jesus did not make a move if/when “His time had not yet come.” Such is why Jesus would remain “cloaked” until the exact moment in time that the Father chooses to reveal His Son to the world…a revelation that began at His baptism (Mark 1, Luke 3, Matthew 3).

By the way, based on what John says later in vs. 26 and vs. 32, the timing of this exchange with the inquisitors is after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. By the time of this exchange in John 1, the Baptist has already discovered who Jesus is, which is why his message here in John’s gospel is not so much “repentance” in preparation for the Lord, but instead, the Baptist is intent on deferring to and pointing to the Lord, who is already in their midst (vs. 27). I’ll come back to that in just a minute.

Let us now quickly consider who the inquisitors are. John simply tells us they are “priests and Levites” from Jerusalem sent from the “Jews.” The “priests and the Levites” are the pawns sent from the Sanhedrin, who is exactly the group John is referring to here when he refers to “the Jews.”

John the Evangelist will use this term “Jews” 71 times in his gospel. All the other gospels combined employ the word “Jews” 15 times. The reason for this observation is quite obvious, but it bears noting: the first three gospels were written to the Jews, or least with a primarily Jewish audience in mind. However, as I mentioned in my introductory message a few weeks ago, John’s gospel is written with the Greek/Gentile reader in mind, so John frequently references the Jews to make clear who He is speaking about. In other words, if John simply reported that “the priests and Levites came to inquire of John,” the Gentile reader might assume the priests came from the temple of Artemis right there in Ephesus! So John has to qualify his statement, clarifying that these priests were commissioned by “the Jews” in Jerusalem. Such qualifying statements would have hardly been necessary for the Synoptic writers.
We will also pick up on a very negative association with this term “Jews” throughout John’s Gospel. Consequently, there have been those throughout history who have leveraged John’s Gospel to justify anti-Semitic attitudes and behavior. It is important for us to address this issue now and often as we go through the John’s Gospel. First, keep in mind that John the Evangelist is JEWISH, so he is critiquing his own people from within. Secondly, we can assume that “the Jews” do not represent all Jewish people given that Jesus, the Baptist, and the disciples were all Jewish, as were thousands who came to the Lord in Jerusalem immediately following the Day of Pentecost as we read in the book of Acts. Nevertheless, after decades of ministry that surely included regular persecutions and accusations from the resident Jews in Ephesus (see Paul’s time in Ephesus), John is not bashful regarding his disappointment and disillusionment with the Jewish leadership, particularly the high-ranking members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Luke helps us to understand the difference between the rank and file Jewish citizen and the Jewish hierarchy, particularly as they related to the Baptist, in Luke 7. In Luke 7 Jesus affirms the greatness of John the Baptist, and Luke parenthetically comments in vs. 29-30, “When all the people heard this, and the tax-collectors too, they declared God as just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.”

Notice the difference between “all the people” and “the Pharisees and the lawyers”. I think that differentiation is often assumed for the Apostle John as well. When he writes poorly of “the Jews,” he is most often referring to the hostile leadership in Jerusalem, not the entire country or the entire people group. He is critiquing them from within, and John would have never supported anti-Semitic attitudes or behaviors…the Jews were his people, and they were family to Jesus as well. I hope that is helpful. We should never leverage the Gospel to demean the Jewish people…EVER.

II. Who the Baptist is NOT

The inquisitors begin their interrogation of the Baptist with the question, “Who are you?” Given who is asking the question, and given who sent them, we can rightly translate this question as, “Who the heck do you think you are?!?” Keep in mind that, prior to the birth of Jesus, there were several “false prophets” who either claimed to be or allowed themselves to be heralded as the Messiah, and they caused all kinds of trouble. Thus, the Baptist knows exactly what the inquisitors are asking. Let us also keep in mind that the Baptist is VERY popular at this point in his ministry. Literally thousands of people from all over Judea, the Jordan region, and even Jerusalem were coming out to hear his preaching and to be baptized (Matt. 3). If there was ever a man who could have legitimately claimed to be the Messiah in the eyes of the people, it was John the Baptist. But notice how John the Evangelist describes the Baptist’s response in vs. 20: He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I…I am not the Christ.” John writes that the Baptist immediately confessed, without equivocation he immediately confessed, “I…I am not the Christ.” Now, I know my translation is a bit different from the ESV, so let us now turn to “the Geek with the Greek.” In the Greek, the literal translation of the words is just what said. The personal pronoun “I” (ego) is placed at the front of the response as a point of emphasis, because in a normal Greek sentence, the phrase “I am” is reflected in the spelling of the word, “eimi,” which literally means, “I am.” So, if both ego and eimi are strung together, it is done so for emphasis. I’m geeking out on this because the Baptist will use this construction often in his
responses to his interrogators, and Jesus will use the same construction for His “I am” statements. In our text this morning, the effect of the Baptist’s response is akin to saying, “I… I am not the Messiah; but Somebody Else here IS!” He’ll imply as much at the end of our passage.

Having eliminated the question of Messiahship, the inquisitors ask their next question in vs. 21, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

OK… I have to make this quick, but there’s a lot here. The Jews had three people they were waiting for, based on their reading of the scriptures: 1) Elijah; 2) the Messiah; and 3) the Prophet. That’s why these three “characters” are mentioned in this inquisition, and the Baptist makes clear that he is none of the three. Most of us are familiar with the prophecies of a Messiah, so I did not unpack that reference… simply due to time restraints. Fewer of us are familiar with the Jewish expectancy of Elijah, and even fewer of us are familiar with “the Prophet” mentioned next, so I will take some time to unpack the reference to Elijah here, and then the Prophet in just a minute.

The very last words from the last of the great OT prophets, Malachi, proclaims this prediction (Mal. 4:5): Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will return the hearts of the fathers to their children and hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter desolation.

This prophecy was HIGHLY respected amongst the Jews. Every Jewish family would have an empty seat and a full cup at their Passover celebration reserved for Elijah. The Jews believed Elijah would come not only to prepare the world for the Messiah, but also to settle all disputes and answer all the unanswered questions. William Barclay writes:

So much did the Jews believe this that the traditional law said that money and property whose owners were disputed, or anything found whose owner was unknown, must wait “until Elijah comes.” It was even believed that Elijah… would raise the dead to share in the new kingdom.

So, is John the fulfillment of God’s promise to send Elijah? According to John the Baptist, the answer is an emphatic, “NO!” Now, the Baptist’s answer is accurate, but that’s not all there is to say about that. In other words, John the Baptist is NOT Elijah… he is John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. So, given the question of the inquisitors, the Baptist can answer definitively: I am not Elijah. However, according to Jesus as recorded in Matthew 17, John the Baptist served as a “type” of Elijah. Here is what Jesus says to his disciples when they ask if Elijah must come:

“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 he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. Jesus makes clear that the Baptist did serve as a “type” of Elijah. Remember what the angel said to Zechariah, John’s father, even before John was born in Luke 1:17, “He (John) will go before him (Jesus) in the spirit and the power of Elijah…” Jesus confirms what the angel proclaimed: John went before Jesus in the spirit and the power of Elijah.

Church, keep in mind that we see clearly now what the Jews could not possibly see in the first century: there are two distinct entrances of the Messiah that are to take place in human history.
The first advent is the one we know of in the Gospels...when Jesus comes as the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. At His first advent, Jesus is heralded by a “type” of Elijah, John the Baptist, who serves as “the messenger who will prepare the way” as predicted in Malachi 3:1 (which is what Jesus says explicitly in Matthew 11:17). However, Jesus Himself...and all of the scriptures...also predict the second and final advent of the Messiah, which will be “the great and awesome day of the LORD.” The second coming of Christ will be quite unlike the first, for Jesus will return not as the Lamb, but as the Lion of Judah. That will be the end of this age, the Final Judgment, and the inauguration of a new heavens and a new earth. I think it likely that the Malachi 4 prophecy was pointing to the second coming of Christ, the great and awesome Day of the Lord, though there are some scholars who think that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy. We’ll see someday, right? OK, let’s move on.

The next question of the inquisitors comes in vs. 21, “Are you the Prophet?” Who are the inquisitors talking about? If you recall, Moses makes a prophetic statement to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 18:18-19:

And the LORD said to me, ‘...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. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.’

Those sent by the Sanhedrin clearly think that the Prophet and the Messiah are two different people, which is why they ask JtB if he is the Prophet even after he denied being the Messiah. On this side of the resurrection, most Christians understand that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the Prophet found in Deut. 18, and I’ll come back to why we believe that later on in our journey through John.

Needless to say, John the Baptist immediately denies being “the Prophet,” with one emphatic word, “NO!”

The inquisitors are stumped. The Baptist has only revealed who he is not; but thus far he has not told them who he is! So they redirect their questioning in vs. 22:

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?” This leads me to my third subheading...

III. Who the Baptist IS

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.”

John the Baptist knows who he is...he has found his place in the narrative, in Isaiah 40:3 “A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare a way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

John the Baptist identifies himself as a “voice;” nothing more, nothing less. He is God’s instrument to proclaim JESUS, to point people to the WORD; to make a straight path for people to meet the One who was entering onto the stage of history for the sake of saving the world. John is the prototype of all who will be called to proclaim Jesus...we are simply the messengers...our job is to point people to Jesus.
Now, as we return to the text, we get the sense that the Sanhedrin had sent along some “specialists” from the Pharisee party…likely not priests or a Levite, but “lawyers” of some sort. The Pharisaic lawyers observe that their priestly friends are getting nowhere, so they wade in with the next question in vs. 25: “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

The lawyers are asking for credentials. Who does this guy think he is? The Big 3 are the only individuals who could be baptizing without credentials, and since he doesn’t claim to be any of those guys, the lawyers want to know where John gets off baptizing people.

There is some debate as to why the inquisitors are asking John this question. Most commentators think it’s because John is baptizing Jews as well as Gentiles, and the Jewish elites in Jerusalem find that to be offensive. Regardless, the Baptist doesn’t really answer their question. John simply responds in vs. 26, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

John has no energy to debate the merits of baptism with the inquisitors when Jesus is standing in their midst. He replies that he “baptizes with water,” and in the synoptics, he would follow that up with, he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt. 3:11). However, here in John’s Gospel, Jesus has already come, and the Baptist says, “He is among you even now…but you don’t know Him.” According to NT Scholar Leon Morris, when John states that he is unworthy to untie the sandal of his Better, he is appealing to a Rabbinic saying, “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong.”

Morris comments: Humility could scarcely take a lower place.

**IV. Preparing the Way for the Gospel**

Let me conclude now with the message that the Baptist so often proclaimed as the means of preparing the way for the Gospel: it is the message of repentance.

Church, consider this: God went to great lengths to raise up a messenger that would preach repentance before revealing His Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The very fact that God predicted “a voice calling out in the wilderness;” the fact that God sent an angel to Zechariah, that Elizabeth gave birth to a son when she was far to old to be giving birth, that the Baptist lived in poverty in the wilderness and yet thousands came to hear his preaching; the fact that “all the people”…the average people…felt convicted to be baptized as an act of repentance prior to knowing Jesus…is not a small, interesting footnote in God’s redemptive story. We would be foolish to ignore how CENTRAL this call to repentance is both in the teaching of the Baptist, and Jesus himself.

I remember when I first began to preach through the Gospel of Luke in early 2011, I told the congregation that I would preach from Luke all the way through Easter, assuming that I would skip large sections of the Gospel, highlighting the parables and then finishing with the Passion and the Empty Tomb. The next week I was in a meeting with the Worship Team, and they were
asking me where I was going in Luke. Having completed all the advent scriptures in Luke 2, I was set to begin Luke 3, featuring John the Baptist, but I did not want to preach on John the Baptist. In fact, I actually said that out loud to my staff, “I don’t want to preach on the Baptist…he’s pretty crazy. I will either jump to the temptations in the wilderness or get started on the parables; after all, I have to keep moving if I’m going to wrap by Easter.” Given that I was still trying to make up mind about what I was going to preach on, the staff went on with the meeting, planning music and announcements and all of that.

Suddenly…and almost violently…I felt something akin to a 2x4 hit me in the back of the head, and I heard the LORD say quite forcefully, “Son, if I sent the Baptist to tell people to repent before I presented my Son, what do you think I want you to do?” At that moment, I received an entire download of my sermon for that Sunday, with very explicit directions. I was to preach on repentance, and I was to call the church to confess those sins that they had never confessed. I was to have the church write down those sins on small pieces of paper, and then pour the “blood of Christ”…the communion drink…over the confessed sins…showing them how the blood of Christ would wash away that which was confessed in the spirit of repentance. All of that…the sermon, the instructions, and the rebuke, happened in an instant. And it happened with so much power that I actually lifted out of my chair and said, “OW!” I’ll never forget that moment, because my team looked at me with concern and asked, “Are you OK?” When I explained what happened, they looked at me as though I was crazy, but that Sunday was a Sunday that, in my opinion, changed the entire trajectory of our church. That day sins were confessed in this church that would curl your hair…so many affairs, so much pornography, so much resentment and unforgiveness, abortions, witchcraft, you name it…there were so many sins that our own church members had NEVER confessed.

Church, listen to me: unconfessed sin is a result of spiritual pride and self-justification. And here’s what I can tell you with absolute certainty: spiritual pride and self-justification will absolutely BLIND you from ever seeing Jesus…ever. It will also block every good thing that God wants to do with this church family. That’s the bad news.

The good news that John the Baptist preached, that Jesus preached, and that I am preaching to you today is this: when we confess our sins, when we repent with broken hearts over our offense to God and our role in nailing Jesus to the cross, John states in 1 John 1:9, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

However, if we say we have no sin, we are self-deceiving…there is no truth in us. Even worse, we make God out to be a liar, and according to John, “His LOGOS is not in us.”

Now…am I talking to the Church…or am I talking to those who are from Christ and are not yet believers? YES!!! Like John the Baptist, I am “a voice”…my job is to call all people to repent, and to point all people (the Church included)…to Jesus, the Lamb, the Word, the Life, and the Light! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life…there is no way to the Father but by Him. And like his forerunner, Jesus calls us all to confess our sins one to another, and to live a lifestyle that involves consistent and regular repentance, such that we will bear fruit that is keeping with repentance…that means that we’ll actually live differently as an expression of our repentance and the grace that we have received in Jesus.
So Church…and those who are not yet believers…repent. Confess your sins to God, place your faith in Jesus as the one who can cleanse you from your sin, and you will be saved. Let us close in prayer, and then we will take communion. Let’s pray.