

“Next Man Up”

“... but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...” (Matthew 3:11b)

Next man up! This isn't a phrase that everyone uses or likely has heard. Yet, the idea that this phrase captures is something I think most everyone understands. Next man up, is a brief way of talking about readiness. In various situations in this earthly life, there's a need to be prepared. We might never know when we're going to get the call to action, but because the possibility exists, we seek to be alert and aware.

This is a common experience observed in sports. When one teammate goes down with injury, another teammate needs to be ready to fill in. This experience is also true in many of the arts, if one band member gets sick, or one choir member has an emergency, or one member of the cast has a complication, others need to be prepared to step up and step in for those who are no longer available. Honestly, it's how workplaces, schools and families operate too. When one integral part of the team is out of commission others must jump in to cover the gap.

Embracing this mentality helps backup athletes stay focused and motivated throughout practices and games. This mindset keeps musicians, vocalists and actors dedicated even when they aren't in the lead roles. It's the kind of thinking that enables workplaces, schools and families to continue to function whenever they're down a teammate. The next man up ideology is ingrained into many of our earthly activities, and it can often be a driving force for success and accomplishment.

Our Gospel reading today connects with this next man up concept, but it does so with a twist. From the mouth of John the Baptist comes that next man up idea, **“I baptize you with water for repentance, but 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.”** (Matthew 3:11) **“... but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...”** with these words John points us to the next man up, Jesus.

Here's our Gospel reading's twist on this next man up perspective. Unlike all the other earthly examples we started with, when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, the next man up isn't you or me or any other ordinary human being. No, the next man up as John proclaims in that historical moment but also demonstrates for people of every generation is the God-man, Jesus Christ. While John was fulfilling his role as the crying voice from the wilderness preparing the Lord's way, he also served as a great example of how one should live out the words he was preaching about Jesus, the next man up.

With the kingdom of heaven breaking in on them through Jesus' presence among them in that very moment, the purpose of the next man up mindset shifts from readiness to repentance. As heaven's reign becomes clear on earth through Jesus' life and ministry, all of humanity is led to realize that they have been and are woefully unprepared. Their words and works haven't increased their readiness for the Messiah's coming and instead have left them in great need of help. So instead of resting in false readiness and pride based on personal, sinful deeds, the coming of the kingdom of heaven shifts things to the humble and contrite attitude and posture of repentance.

Even prior to this moment in history with John the Baptist, God had been linking this next man up idea to repentance. From the Fall of Adam and Eve onward, God had instilled in each generation to come this next man up concept. Based on His promise that the Seed of the Woman would crush the head of the serpent, family after family longed to see this next man rise up from their family to redeem and restore all people. However, each hopeful heir to this promise was ultimately a letdown. From Cain to Noah to Abraham to Moses to the judges to the prophets, priests and kings, yes, even King David, all of them failed to step up and step in for humanity's greatest need with their fallen and sinful condition. But now here in the time of John the Baptist, humanity's dynasty of disappointments was

giving way to the true next Man up – the One who came after and is mightier than all those who came before, including John the Baptist.

Those feeble and frail next men up that humanity produced from Adam and Eve until this moment foreshadowed Jesus' complete fulfillment as the next man up. What John the Baptist proclaims in our reading this weekend, is that finally the long-awaited Messiah had come. Jesus had come not merely to handle things for several years but for all time. Paul puts it this way in our second reading from Romans, **“Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”** (*Romans 15:8-9b*)

Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension accomplished what those in the past could not and delivers what everyone since His death and resurrection still need. As the perfect next man up, Jesus hung on the cross for every person ever created and then rose from the grave so that every person might be brought to faith in Him and receive forgiveness of their sins and the sure and certain hope of life eternal with Him in heaven.

Now, while you and I are on the other side of the cross and empty tomb from John the Baptist in our Gospel reading, like him we still need to understand that this next man up idea for God's kingdom is still filled by Jesus. For us, Jesus, the One who has come, remains mightier than us. To borrow from another one of John the Baptist's sayings, even on this side of the cross and empty tomb we must decrease, and Jesus must increase. Just because Jesus finished His saving work long before you and I were born doesn't mean it's outdated and needs to be replaced. What Jesus accomplished remains as fresh now as it did when it was being carried out in John the Baptist's day.

So, for us we continually look back to the One who remains the perfect next man up for us still today. We resist the devil's temptation and trap to think that Jesus did His part now we must do our part. We aren't the next ones up to guarantee that our salvation is secure. No, that's the job that remains completed by Jesus. And no matter how forgetful and doubtful we become with His completed work, He willingly and wearilessly leads us back to the forgiveness and assurance He has accomplished for us.

And this ongoing work that Jesus is doing in our lives was foreshadowed by the work John the Baptist was doing in our text this weekend. Like people went out to John the Baptist to repent, be baptized and confess their sins, Jesus has come to us to bring us to repentance, to be baptized and live in that baptismal gift confessing our sins and bearing the fruit of repentance. Jesus, our next man up, has come as the One mightier than our sinful selves to raise up in us the new man who lives in the grace and mercy He has given.

Daily, our Lord and Savior Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, works in us to drown that sinful man who seeks to replace Jesus and move Him to the bench. Through His forgiveness, mercy and grace, He strengthens the new man in us to recognize and rejoice that He has taken our place and paid our debt. He strengthens this new man to realize that our role in God's kingdom isn't as the lead, but as a follower. He strengthens the new man to relinquish prideful prominence for humble service. Our work not only follows His but points to His. We live in response to what He has done, for He who has come remains mightier than us. **“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that Jesus remains the next man up for us, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”** (*pulled from Romans 15:13*) Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan