

Date: June 23, 2019

Scripture: John 20:31, Various texts from the Gospels

Title: RBC Camp: *In the Wild! – Encounter at the River*

A few years back we took a team to Kenya to work alongside the men and women of *Amani ya Juu*. As part of that mission trip, Cathie Burke, who serves there full time, arranged it so we could visit the National Park that adjoins Nairobi. We were divided into three of those vans that have roofs that open up so you can stand up and see clearly and each was driven by a professional guide---linked with other guides who had CB radios.

When one driver spotted an exotic animal, he'd radio the rest and we'd bounce off at high speed, heading deeper into the wild so we could all get a good look. With their help we saw lions, zebras, giraffes, monkeys, rhinos, ostriches, water buffalo and much more---all living in their natural habitat.

Well, this next week we're doing something like that for the children who come here for RBC Camp. Starting this afternoon and running through Friday, hundreds of children and their families will go "*Into the Wild!*"

In the same way we took snapshots of all those animals outside of Nairobi, our plan is for the kids is to lead them through studies of Biblical snapshots of Jesus' earthly ministry. Our theme verse explains why. It's John 20:31 and it says, "***These things have been written so that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name.***"

It's our prayer that children and their families will come to believe in Jesus this week.

This morning I want us to look at one of the Biblical snapshots our kids will be studying. And I'm referring to the story about John the Baptist, an individual who really fits this year's theme because he was somewhat "wild" in how he dressed and what he ate---not to mention the fact that he lived and served God out in the wilds of Judea.

Let's begin by getting the historical setting. John's ministry took place in 29 A.D. and this was a very difficult time for the nation of Israel. There are a couple reasons for this.

First, Israel was an occupied nation. For the past three years Roman governors had been in charge and that year a guy named Pontius Pilate was calling the shots. You and I don't know what occupation is like---but imagine we had lost WW2. Imagine Hitler's armies marching through our streets all the time---and you get the idea.

In 29 A.D. Israel was also enduring a sort of "religious occupation." I mean, the Jews had religious freedom under the Romans, but most of the Jewish religious leaders were not good guys. Caiaphas was the high priest officially but his father-in-law, Annas, former high priest who had been deposed by Valerius Gratus in 15 A.D. was still the true power behind the throne. This is why the gospel accounts refer to "***the priesthood of Annas AND Caiaphas.***" The truth is Annas was the head of a vast empire of organized religious corruption in Jerusalem. Essentially, he was the Mafia "Godfather" of the foremost crime family in the capital city. One of his biggest sources of income came from the money-changers and animal inspectors and salesmen who took over the courtyard of the temple. I'm sure you remember the times Jesus drove all those "mafia cronies" out of His Father's house.

Anyway, it was in this time of political and spiritual darkness that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled and "***a voice came crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.'***" (Isaiah 40:3) Luke's Gospel gets more specific and puts it this way: "***The Word of God came to John.***" (Luke 3:1) Now understand the "wow factor" of this announcement. God had not said a WORD to Israel in 400 years. The last four centuries had been silent ones. No prophets---NO word from God at all. Again, we have a hard time understanding what this would have been like so let me try to give you an idea. Imagine no worship where a

pastor teaches God's Word---no guidance from God---nothing---and this silence from above lasted four centuries. For us that would mean our hearing nothing from God since Shakespeare breathed his last.

You may remember that Amos had FORETOLD these centuries of God's SILENCE. In Amos 8:11, he said, ***"The days are coming, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea and wander from north to east searching for the Word of the Lord but they will not find it."***

Well, God chose John for the special privilege of speaking for Him---breaking this long silence. And he wasn't to deliver just ANY word from God. No, John's job was to INTRODUCE our Lord, the long-awaited Messiah to the nation of Israel. To show you how big a deal John and his special calling were---he is mentioned at least 89 times in the New Testament.

Now—if you've ever read about John then I'm sure you'll agree with me when I say that he was indeed "wild." He came striding out of the WILD-erness wearing a coat made of camel hair with a home-made leather belt around his waist. His diet consisted of nothing but locusts and wild honey. I can't imagine what his teeth looked like after a constant diet of bugs---remember, these were the days before the invention of dental floss! I mean, he was definitely not the kind of guy you would want your daughter to bring home one day. I think with his desert survival skills John would have done well on one of the SURVIVOR reality shows, but he would probably have been one of the first voted off the island because of his character.

You see, John wasn't a people pleaser. He didn't hesitate to step on people's toes if need be. He shot from the hip. In fact, his no-holes-barred truth telling is what got John beheaded. Remember, when he preached against the sexual immorality of King Herod? John wasn't a salesman, who would try to sweet talk you into something. Nor was he a politician, who would try to match his words to the popular opinion of the day. No John didn't care what PEOPLE said or thought about him. All he cared about was pleasing God, so His sole focus was on delivering God's message and he faithfully did that no matter how many people he offended.

Charles Swindoll says, if John were to put his plan of action for his ministry in a book like many mega-church pastors do---it would include these chapter headings:

- Don't go where the people are. Make them come to you.
- Don't waste your money on seats. Don't provide chairs. Make them stand.
- No building required. Make people stand out in the hot sun while you preach.
- Dress unattractively. Avoid the latest trends. Look and dress weird on purpose.
- Speak offensively. Insult your listeners and verbally attack your opponents. Use harsh, condemning words. Call your detractors *"snakes in the grass"* and *"hypocrites."*
- Don't worry about being politically correct or about losing your tax-exempt status—condemn the evil in your nation's rulers directly—from the pulpit.
- Tell your attenders to worship elsewhere. In short, encourage YOUR followers to follow a more worthy leader. In fact, admit your utter unworthiness by comparison.

As I said, John's job was to prepare the way for the Messiah and part of that meant sermons focused on pointing out the sin of people---the sin that made them NEED a Savior. John did a great job with this necessary kind of sermon. He wasn't hesitant to call sin---sin---and to tell his congregation they had to repent---in other words they had to realize their actions were sin---they had to feel bad enough about those actions to turn from them.

Many years ago, Harry Ironside wrote about our world's need for John's kind of preaching. He said, *"Such a ministry is needed greatly today when men have lost, in large measure the sense of the sinfulness of sin. It is useless to preach the gospel of the grace of God to men who have no realization of their need of that grace."* I think our world STILL needs sermons like John delivered.

Well—in spite of his non-PC mode of preaching and his radical diet and dress, John became immensely popular. Matthew’s gospel says that people came to hear him from **“Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.”** (Matthew 3:5) And these multitudes included all segments of the population—tax collectors, soldiers, the rich, and the poor. Even the religious leaders came to check him out.

Now, why do you think John had such broad appeal? Why did the multitudes go out INTO THE WILD to hear this WILD guy? I believe it was because the people of that day longed to hear from God. We all have this inborn need to fellowship with our Creator. I mean, people in our day and age have the same HUNGER to hear from God as those people did for WE live in a difficult time---a time of moral erosion----a time of weekly mass-shootings---a time when innocent children are not safe as they walk home from school---a time of storms and bombings. All these things remind us that we are fallen beings living in a fallen world—and because of this people long to hear from God. They long to know that He loves them and cares for them. They thirst for His guidance—and you and I—as children of God—we are His spokesmen—we are His prophets. We are all like John in that we are charged with giving the WORD of GOD to the people around us! It is our task to share the HOPE that the WORD OF GOD MADE FLESH—the hope that only Jesus brings.

Okay—this morning as we look at the life and ministry of John the Baptist, I want us to learn how, like John, we can fulfill our God-given charge. Jesus said John was the greatest person ever born---so wouldn’t you agree that he’s the kind of guy we should emulate? So—what makes John a prototype of the kind of person we should strive to be? What was it about this wild guy that made him so good at pointing people to Jesus?

I want to mention two things and the first is:

(1) John’s ATTITUDE.

You see, in spite of his great popularity, John remained a HUMBLE man and the clearest indication of this was the way he always put Jesus first.

Usually when I preach and have a point to make I have to search books or the Internet or think of an incident from my own life to illustrate what I’m trying to say---but today, not so much because John the Baptist was a preacher too—and he used two wonderful illustrations—two word pictures that God inspired him to use.

A. The first is found in the interview that took place when the emissaries from the Sanhedrin arrived and asked him who he was.

John knew what they were getting at so when they asked about his identity, he gave them a very forceful reply. He said, **“I am not the Christ!”** Now—in John’s day there had already been several messianic pretenders. Historians like Josephus tell us this—and in Acts 5:36-37, Gamaliel talked about some of these false Christs as well when he said, **“Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.”** In Acts 21:38 some people even asked Paul if he were the Messiah saying, **“Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?”**

I mention this so that you’ll understand that with John’s great popularity it would have been very easy for him to announce that yes, he was the Messiah. If he had done so, I’m certain that the multitudes would have followed much more eagerly than they had followed the others who claimed to be the Christ.

But John said NO---I’m not the Messiah! And we see how firmly he refuted this in the forcefulness of his reply. Luke’s account tells us that John **“...did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ.’”** (Luke 3:20)

Instead of asking for more information about the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, this one-track-minded delegation pressed on in their interrogation and asked, ***“Well, if you’re not the Messiah, then, are you Elijah?”*** They asked this because they knew it had been prophesied that Elijah would return. In the very last verses of the Old Testament book of Malachi, God had said, ***“I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”*** (Malachi 4:5) But they misunderstood the prophecy. Elijah would come—but not in the flesh—at least not yet. As the angel had said to his father prior to his birth, John would, ***“...go on before the Lord, in the SPIRIT and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** (Luke 1:17)

In any case, when asked if he was Elijah in the flesh John said, ***“I am not.”*** Well, with two “no responses” under their belt, these guys asked John if he was “the prophet,” a reference to something Moses said in Deuteronomy 18: ***“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”*** But John denied being “the prophet” as well.

So, in essence they said, ***“Well you have exhausted our checklist. If you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet...then who or what are you? Give us an answer to take back to the other priests and Levites.”*** And in his response John gives us our first word picture—our first SERMON ILLUSTRATION as he said, ***“I am the VOICE of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”*** (John 1:23)

Note how John HUMBLed himself here in the things he did NOT say.

- He did NOT say, ***“I am John, the son of Zacharias the priest.”***
- He did not say, ***“An angel foretold my birth. God made it possible for me to be born to elderly parents---like He did for Abraham and Sarah.”***
- He did not say, ***“The Holy Spirit entered my body when I was still in my mother’s womb.”***
- He did not say, ***“I am God’s greatest prophet and the Messiah is my Cousin.”***
- He didn’t even say he was a man!

He simply said, ***“I am but a VOICE.”*** No claims for himself---just a voice crying out, ***“Make straight THE WAY of the Lord.”***

Now, in John’s day, the roads of Israel were not surfaced. They were mere tracks and when it rained the tracks made by carts would harden into ruts. When a king was about to visit a province—or when a conqueror was about to travel through his domains—the roads he would use were repaired—smoothed and straightened out and put in order.

So, what John was saying then was this, ***“I am a nobody; I’m just the road repairman; I am only a voice telling you to get ready for the coming of the King.”*** In short, John was what every preacher, teacher—every CHRISTIAN—ought to be a VOICE pointing to Jesus.

Listen friends, anytime people see US instead of Jesus, anytime WE grab the spotlight—anytime we get in the way of people hearing of God’s great love---we are straying from the standard that John the Baptist has set. To be great in God’s eyes we must remember that we are NOT great. We are to be just a voice—pointing people to Jesus. We must always remember that if we do anything good—God must get the praise for as John said, ***“A man can receive only what is given him from Heaven.”*** (John 3:27)

B. The second word picture is in the third chapter of John’s gospel.

There we read that after Jesus came, more and more of John’s multitude began to leave him and go to hear Jesus. When John’s followers asked him how he felt about the dwindling of his multitude, he once again showed his humility. John says, ***“You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of Him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.”*** (John 3:27-8)

Now, you may remember that in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is repeatedly pictured as the bride and God as the Bridegroom. For example, when Israel left to follow false idols, God used this word picture and charged them with spiritual ADULTERY. This is the picture John had in mind here. He knew that Jesus was God in the flesh which made Israel His rightful bride. So, John drew on that word picture said he was the FRIEND of the bridegroom, the “shoshoben” in Hebrew. Now—the shoshoben had a unique place at a Jewish wedding. He was like a combination best man/wedding director. He arranged the wedding. He delivered the invitations and set everything up for the wedding feast. And—when all this was done he had one more VERY SPECIAL duty. You see, after the ceremony, it was his job to be the liaison between the bride and the bridegroom. It was his task to guard the bedchamber where the bride waited and let no false lover in. He would only open the door when he heard and recognized the bridegroom’s voice. When he did, he let the groom in and then went away rejoicing---for his task was completed. He did not begrudge the bridegroom and the bride their joy. He knew that his only task had been to bring them together and when that was done, he willingly and gladly faded out of the picture.

Do you see the connection? John’s task was to bring the Messiah and Israel together. Once that was done, he was happy to fade into obscurity---like the echo of a voice that eventually becomes inaudible.

So, it was not with ENVY that he said Jesus must increase and he must decrease. It was with the JOYFUL AWARENESS that he had done the job God entrusted him with.

Well, as I said, this is one way we should emulate John. We should do everything we can to bring people to Jesus. Getting them together should be our joy. Anytime people start focusing on US and praising US for what we do---anytime we find ourselves wanting to make sure people notice what WE do for God---we are treading on dangerous territory, because our job is like John’s. We are to point people to Jesus. It’s not about us—EVER.

Listen, until we need to embrace the kind of self-denial that John practiced. Jesus must increase. We must decrease. I know I said I didn’t need any illustrations of my own---but I’d like to show you one. It’s from ABC news’ *The Person of the Week*. I think the person in this one illustrates this principle of humility.

<https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/persons-week-highlights-runner-high-school-cross-country-42819414>

That’s a great segue into the second thing that makes John great—someone we should emulate:

(2) **His ACTIONS.**

I mean, John didn’t just sit around being humble. Like that young man who went into action to help the autistic runner, John did the good work that God had prepared in advance for him to do. He was faithful to proclaim the message God had given him. His was a VOICE was always crying out in ways that helped people understand Who Jesus was---and what He came to do. For example, in Luke 3:25 John’s interrogators asked, ***“If you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, why do you BAPTIZE?”*** He answered their question by saying, ***“The reason I came baptizing with water was so that He—the Christ—the One Whose sandals I am not worthy to untie—I came baptizing with water that HE might be revealed to Israel.”*** (John 1:25, 31)

Now—these religious leaders asked this question because in their minds water baptism was something Gentiles did---Gentiles converting to Judaism. Being immersed was a way for these non-Jews—these pagans---to admit and repent of their sins. But John was baptizing everyone—even the JEWS! He was saying that they were just as bad as the pagans in the world.

And we have to understand how shocking this would have been to them. It would be like our criticizing a nun to her face or ranting at a Salvation Army officer as he collected money so that children could have toys at Christmas. Everyone back then thought of the Pharisees as the crème de la crème of righteousness.

John was also challenging the Jewish concept that every descendant of Abraham was already in God's kingdom. Listen to what he said to them in Matthew 3, ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 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.”***

John's actions were shocking to the Jewish establishment. His message raised eyebrows for he was saying as Paul would later, that ***“ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”***

But that's not all John did. He didn't just tell his listeners that they were sinners. No—he also told them that our Loving God had come in the flesh—come to do something about our sin. When our Lord walked by, John said, ***“Look, there He is! That Man is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. This is the One I was talking about. I baptize with water but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”*** (John 1)

Now—this delegation would have understood the phrase “lamb of God” Back then, every Jew would have understood the concept of a SACRIFICIAL LAMB. Israel had also known about the sacrificial lamb ever since the institution of the Passover—when the blood of an innocent lamb was put on the doorpost of their homes to keep the death angel away. And—they knew that every day in the services of the temple lambs and goats were sacrificed for sins.

They knew that in every instance those sacrifices meant the death of an innocent substitute in place for the one who had sinned. So—they would have understood that John was proclaiming the shocking message that the Messiah would be the Lamb of God—come to die for our sins. After all, he was echoing Isaiah's prophecy, saying that the temple sacrifices were to be fulfilled in the Messiah—Jesus—Who would bear our sin. Do you remember Isaiah's words? ***“Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His wounds we are healed.”*** (Is 53:4-5)

I like to think that as John said this about Jesus---as he identified Him as the sin-bearing Lamb---I like to think that the flocks of lambs that were driven up to the walls of Jerusalem each year to serve as sacrificial lambs for the Passover were passing by. This is not far-fetched because the Passover feast was not far off---so perhaps John was led to refer to Jesus in this fashion because those lambs walking by showed vividly that Jesus was able to deliver from death those who believed in Him.

Shortly after this incident John looked up at the line of people waiting to be baptized and he saw Jesus waiting His turn. This meant John's ministry had run its course. It had accomplished its purpose. Only one task remained—introduce the Messiah and this introduction would be through baptism. Now—why was Jesus baptized? After all, He had no sin for which to repent.

- Some say that, Jesus was like the high priest who immersed or washed himself before entering the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement--to purify himself after contact with anything unclean.
- Some say Jesus was baptized to identify with His followers.
- Some say it was a symbolic way to say that John's job was now done—a way to officially pass the baton so to speak.

But I think by being baptized Jesus was giving a PICTURE—a PREVIEW—of His primary purpose in coming to earth. Jesus' baptism was a picture of His atoning death—the burial that followed it—AND his victorious resurrection three days later.

In short, Jesus' baptism was a picture of His work of redemption. As such, it was indeed the perfect way for Jesus to BEGIN HIS MINISTRY.

And like every parent who shows up for this significant event in His child's life, God showed up—and so did the Holy Spirit. Heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended and God spoke saying, ***“You are My Son, Whom I love; with You I am well pleased.”*** (Luke 3:22)

So, understand, every Person of the Trinity was present at the same time—one of only three times we see this happening in the Bible.

I wonder—what would happen in Derwood if more Redlanders patterned their lives after the man Jesus called the Greatest man of all time? What would change if we strove to be as humble as John---always pointing people toward Jesus? What difference would it make in our community if we were as faithful as he was to call people to repentance and tell them of what Jesus did on the cross? I wonder!

As I told you when I began, Jesus said that no one was better than John the Baptist—that in essence he was the Greatest Man of All Time. But did you ALSO know that in a very real sense the “contest” for this title is not over? In Matthew 11:11 Jesus said, ***“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not been anyone greater than John the Baptist.”*** and then Jesus said, ***“...yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”***

If we embrace John's attitude and actions---if we humble ourselves and do all we can to help people understand Who Jesus is---and What He has done, God can do even greater things through us!

Let us pray.