

The Rev. Billy Cervený:

Hey, everybody. How are we doing? we good. It's good night. I love this story of John the Baptist. Normally, the way I like to do sermons and the way I craft sermons is I always read a passage and I try to find the problem. That's the writer of this. The scripture is addressing to the people. His audience is direct audience.

And I try to find the problem that we share with him. And sometimes that problem is kind of buried in the scriptures. So you have to tell a little bit of a story to excavate it a little bit. So you can understand, like this is the issue we're addressing today. And we kind of spin it around a little bit.

But in this passage here, the passage John the Baptist, this is such a rich story. I don't need to do that because it tells it tells us everything we need to know about our hearts. And I want to do it. I do want to do is give a little context here because of our who John the Baptist was.

Why John the Baptist was in the character that he was. And I don't mean that like a character in a story. I mean just this massive, three dimensional, mile high personality of a man. And what we need to see is it is a little context here in the Old Testament. We want to talk about what a prophet is, because John, the Baptist is described as a prophet and what a prophets were.

They were this unique blend of people in the Old Testament. We see them a lot. And what prophets weren't necessarily they weren't just people that told the future. They weren't people that said, on this day, at this hour or this time, this is going to happen. It wasn't prophet like that though. There was some of that prophets. They were men like Elijah, Moses, Samuel.

These were people who heard directly from God. They were the red phone guys. They were the ones that the God spoke to directly and had this huge role in Scripture. They were the ones that kept kings in line. They were the one that spoke to leaders that would step into the throne room and put their fingers in the chest of those who were in power and say, you're wrong.

They were the ones that stood up in the. Anytime you hear the phrase, thus saith the Lord, that's a prophet speaking. And anytime they say that phrase, you better listen because he it's his job to his faithfully communicate what God has whispered in his ear to speak to the people. And these prophets would come and they, they would, they would speak like I said, they would speak, to power.

They would offer, they would communicate God's law, they would communicate direction. But most of all, they were the ones who wrote or sanctioned what would eventually become Scripture. They were the ones. Everything you read in the Bible, everything you read in the New Testament, either was written by a prophet or was sanctioned by a prophet. It was stamped by a prophet.

Everything in the Old Testament to the New Testament. But wait a second, what about the New Testament? Then? The apostles? Weren't they the ones that were the that wrote that? Yes, they were the last prophets. The apostles were the last prophets that we had. So people always say when you hear that, because he's a really interesting guy. Everybody thinks to myself, I would it be cool to be a prophet, to like God?

Tag me, I'm a prophet. It would not be cool to be a prophet. These guys had miserable lives. These guys suffered in ways for which we have no reference point. I guess if you're called to be it, it's pretty cool. But just from a normal person's perspective, lens. Difficult job. They suffered in ways that you can't imagine. They were persecuted.

They lived these lives of in constant physical and spiritual danger. They dress funny. They lived. They lived a life set apart from other people. You have examples of people like Isaiah. There was moments in Isaiah's life, three years of Isaiah, a little known fact about Isaiah, three years of Isaiah's life. He spent walking around without any clothes on and without any shoes on, because he was a living performance art piece of Israel's vulnerability in making treaties with the enemy.

That happened. And Isaiah was eventually sawn in two. So he had a very difficult life before that. Or you read the Old Testament and you read the New Testament. The one thing I just I want to drive home is that every narrative, every narrative, movement, everything that we see

through the Old Testament all the way through, we are carried on the backs of prophets all the way through, from Genesis to Malachi, all the way from Matthew to Revelation.

So Genesis through Malachi, we land at the end of Malachi is a minor prophet, and it's the last book of the Old Testament. In the last verses it says, behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. Which is foreshadowing that when the Messiah comes, when the Christ comes, that that God is going to send this prophet in the Spirit of Elijah.

And at that moment God goes quiet 400 years. We don't hear a word. Israel is conquered. They build the Second Temple. They're waiting. They're leaning in. Where is this God? The Pharisees class grows. The Sadducees grow. This entire culture of Jerusalem. This religious class grows and they're waiting and they're leaning in. Where is the Messiah? When is he going to come?

And then all of a sudden there's this old man named Zechariah and his wife named Sarah, and he's a priest at the temple, and they can't have babies, and they're waiting and they're waiting and they're faithful. And all of a sudden, the angel Gabriel appears to them at night, a little prophetic if the name, if the angel Gabriel ever appears to you, God is serious about what's about to happen next.

He is his. He is a number one angel for these jobs. And he sends him in and he tells. He tells Zechariah and he tells Elizabeth, I said, Sarah, excuse me. He tells Elizabeth that there's going to be a child that's born. And they give them as this child. And when John the Baptist emerges and when he cries, the babies cry out of his mother's womb.

The prophetic silence is broken because he is the last of the Old Testament prophets to come. And John is set apart. He is set aside. He is consecrated with his Nazarite vow and a Nazarite vow. Is this thing that happens in the Old Testament? You read about it in the Book of Numbers, where anybody that is set aside by God, they have to live this really extreme life.

They're never allowed to cut their hair. Think Samson he had taken the Nazarite vow. They couldn't eat certain foods. They had to wear certain things they could never marry. They could

never, they could never have children. They could, never drink alcohol. They could eat certain foods. They couldn't eat other foods. This was John the Baptist.

This is why he was so weird. He lived out in the wilderness. He dressed in camel's hair. And he also reflected the spirit of, Elijah. And after millennia of waiting, the Messiah was finally it was finally coming. And the Lord spoke to John. What did he say to him? It is your job. You have one job, and your job is to prepare the way.

You're the road guy, man. You're clearing the path. You got to prepare. You got to break the ground of people's hearts. You got to get it to where they can see and recognize the Messiah when he comes. So what? He stands up and he's saying, repent. Listen, you got to break. You got to look at your hearts honestly.

Repent, because the Messiah, the Christ, is coming. And when he's coming, he's bringing an ax and he's laying it at the foot of the tree. And what else does he say? He says he's bringing a winnowing fork. He's going to separate the wheat from the chaff, and it's severe. So fall on your face before the Lord and, and prepare your hearts.

And in true fashion, John the Baptist, he didn't just speak, the truth to the people. He spoke truth to power. Because at this moment, Rome was in charge. And in this moment there was a person that ruled over Galilee, where John preached, a guy by the name of Herod, and they needed to do well. John did this because Rome needed it.

Now, Herod, let me just tell you a little bit about Herod. This is Herod Antipas, and Herod Antipas was the son of the great King Herod the Great. Now there are two different Herod's king Herod the Great. He's the one that we see in the birth story of Jesus. He's the really bad one, that when Jesus gets to be around two years old and he goes and sends his soldiers and he wipes out all the two year old boys, and he murders all the babies, that because he could not stomach the idea of a Jewish king coming along, he had sons.

And when King Herod the Great died, he had all these sons and he broke his kingdom apart. And, and, and Herod Antipas was one of his sons. And what Herod Antipas was really ambitious.

And while his brothers had different chunks of the kingdom, Herod Antipas said, I want it all, and I have a plan, and the way I'm going to get it is I am going to consolidate the Herodian dynasty, and I'm going to do this.

I'm going to marry this woman, Herodias, and I'm going to marry her, and I'm going to bring these two branches of the family together and consolidate our power. The problem with that is to marry her means he would be marrying his niece. And that is a that is a no no for the Jewish people, for obvious reasons. And the second reason it was a no no is that she was already married to Herod's brother.

Double no. No. Right. So what does he do? He goes and he visits. He seduces her. He convinces her they get married and it's a scandal throughout the country. And no one would say a word because guess what? Herod was not a good guy and they were scared of him. Except for one person JTB, John the Baptist. And he loved to because he was a prophet and he loved to speak truth to power.

And he called Herod out publicly. The funny thing about this is this Herod loved John the Baptist. He was intrigued by him. He thought he was this like mystical guy that spoke some truth that he always would. He would listen to him, and he would listen form and try to figure out what he was doing and what was going on.

But the problem was this his wife hated him and his wife wanted him dead, and Herod was unwilling to kill him. So what he decided was, instead of letting my wife be embarrassed instead of killing John the Baptist, I'm just going to arrest him and I'm going to throw him in jail. So John gets put into this jail cell.

Which brings us to our passage. Now, John was a lot of things, but he was faithful. He had done his job, he had faithfully listened to the Lord, and he had faithfully executed his duty. And he had faithfully told the people the truth about what was coming. He proclaimed the message, repent, the Lord is coming to lay the ax to the tree.

And John sitting there in prison, and he's hearing these stories about Jesus. The passage says he's hearing these stories, and he's saying, what? What do you mean? He's sitting with women at the well, what do you mean? He's just gathering children to him, or he's eating with tax collectors, or he's just doing all this mercy stuff. Jesus, what are you.

What are you doing? You're supposed to be the guy that brings the acts. You're supposed to be the guy that brought the winnowing fork. And here I am, rotting in jail. I did my job. Rise up, lead us, reestablish Israel, take the throne. This is not the way this was supposed to unfold. Jesus is falling far short of my expectations, is what John is saying at this moment in verse two.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to them, are you the one? Are you the one who was to come? Or shall we look for another like that? Do did I miss something here? And in that moment John the Baptist is washed in doubt. Doubt. John the Baptist, the one that Jesus said in our very passage that there is none greater than John, the Baptist, that he's of all the men that have come, that have been born and have been raised, there is none greater than he that guy.

He's washed him down. It seems so. And it's just seems so, so like just weak, doesn't it? It does to me. Here's the point I want you to catch from this to John the Baptist. He doesn't doubt because he's weak. He doubts because he's human. It is a doubt. Just because he's weak. He doubts because he's a human and he's not alone.

If you read the story of Elijah and in First Kings 19, after Elijah steps on Mount Carmel, and he does this spiritual battle with all the priests of Baal, and he calls fire down to explode the temple. One page later, Elijah is being chased by Jezebel and he runs and he hides in the cave and he's cowering and he's saying, Lord, I can't believe you did this.

And he's hiding up there, and he's doubting the Lord's plan and doubting the Lord's goodness.

I have to admit, because it's troubling when I hear that that's Elijah as John the Baptist, as I hear this, if these guys are like that, these guys you heard directly from God, the ones that write scripture, if they doubt, if they doubt, what chance do I have of not doubting?

None. No chance. And neither do you. Now we might hear that is bad news, but I want you here. That's beautiful news. At least that we would that this was written in the scriptures. Let me tell you why. The beauty of this, the reason that we can read Scripture and we can trust it, the reason I can read a passage like that, and I can be like, okay, I can do this is you guys, let me ask you this.

If you were to start a religion and you were trying to convince people and you're going to pull the wool over everybody's eyes to trust, come and follow me. Go do the thing that I'm doing. Give me your money. Come to my church. Do that thing. If I'm going to start a religion, guess the first thing that I'm going to do is I'm going to whitewash the scriptures that I have everyone that's part of my, the essential part of my history, my story, everyone you're supposed to look up to.

I'm going to make them perfect. I'm going to make them these gleaming examples of moral and courageous fortitude that you they would never faltered, that never that never wavered. Why? Because if you do this, and you do like we say, you'll be like us. But that's not what our scriptures do. There are no heroes in our Bible. There's one hero in our Bible, and it's Jesus.

Every person John doubts, Elijah doubts. Peter denies David killed. Come on, the sweat hogs, man. They are. It's the people that can't keep it together. And for me, I'm like, okay, I can do that. I get that. And the point is this in this passage is, is it? You're going to doubt it's not just part of the human experience.

It is a fundamental part of the Christian journey. And with that in mind, what I want to encourage you is that as a Christian, your goal need not to be or get to a place to become a person who doesn't doubt your goal is to mature into a person who understands the nature of doubt and how to handle it when it comes along.

Because I assure you, it will. And I know you probably already know this already. You probably already experienced in your life. Where does it come from? See John's doubt what we just read here it comes when his expectations, what he thought collided with God's reality, who he thought Jesus was going to be, collided with, who Jesus really was.

John gets this general Jesus instead of this towering Jesus with a hammer and an ax coming. What in the world? He's saying himself. Can you relate to that? Can you relate to the God you thought you were going to get? The God that that that you were you were supposed to do this God. And look what happened. I supposed to have this kind of marriage.

God. But look at the kind of marriage I had. Or as my kids are supposed to be this way or that way, or my career was going to be this, and now it's that. God, I could have sworn I listened to you. You told me to turn left. I was faithful, and look what I've done. I followed you.

My expectations collide with the reality of what it. What you truly are. Oh, I begin to doubt. I doubt your goodness. I got God's power. I doubt God's opinion of me. I got a doubt. My role in God's plan. Because when God falls short of my perspective, I get offended. It offends me. And I'll tell you why.

Because the real Jesus will always offend my homemade version of Jesus. It just will. Because we all had this homemade version of Jesus, this Jesus that we built in our little laboratories of self-interest, using all the ingredients of my choosing. You know what I'm talking about. This Jesus that we cobbled together that has my perspective, the Jesus that's got my agenda, the Jesus that has my politics, that's my Jesus, that's my homespun Jesus.

He votes the way I vote. He laughs at the jokes I laugh at. He goes to the places I go to. He doesn't make me uncomfortable ever. My homespun Jesus is about making me feel better. It's about my comfort and standing in front of a homemade Jesus. It's like standing in front of a mirror. And I don't mean in that.

Oh, I feel so convicted of my sin sort of way. When I stand in front of a mirror. I mean, it's like stand in front of a mirror and that homespun Jesus, all he does and that moment is inflate my ego as we spiritually atrophy. Ben Jones is one of the priests here. He said this last we were talking about this passage, he says nobody falls on their knees in front of their own mirror, and nobody falls before the Jesus they've crafted in their own image.

He's just another version of me. And what Jesus does that Jesus, he comes and like what we see with John, John the Baptist. When we begin to doubt and we begin to doubt, let me just encourage you that doubt in and of itself is not forsaking Jesus. Doubt in and of itself is not forsaking Jesus. Doubt is not even the opposite of belief.

Doubt is that experience. If we just talk about where my expectations fall short from the reality of Jesus, where I go on this spiritual and emotional and intellectual wake up call experientially, I'm afraid experientially I'm hurt. I'm confused, I feel powerless, and it brings me to this place that is not the opposite of belief. It stands me before these two doors.

And I have a choice in that moment. And one of those doors I can either walk through is faith, and the other one is despair. And they are two very different journeys that will produce two very different fruits in my life. You read Matthew 11, John the Baptist. He's sitting in his prison cell. Now, again, to put this in context, that is bad news for anybody to sit in a prison cell.

But for John the Baptist, that is catastrophic means a prophet. He's got his followers, can't see him. John the Baptist, he can't baptize anybody. He can't walk in the throne rooms or call out the people in power. There's nothing that's going on in that moment that, by any metric of successful ministry, is a success. His ministry is falling apart.

What good is a prophet if he can't prophesy? Like, what good is it? And John is sitting there hearing these confusing stories about Jesus, and he's thinking himself, did I, did I miss this? Who is this God? Doubt upon doubt upon doubt. See, for me, in that place becomes a place I easily can become a place of despair, that can easily become a place of despair.

Despair is when the heart decides that my story is beyond repair. The guy looks and he's just like, man, I just I'm just not getting my hands in that God has done. He has forgotten about me. Nothing good is going to happen for this, for me in this situation. This is when my story begins to collapse inward. And despair is the opposite of faith.

It in thrones my own perspective, it in thrones, my own conclusions. It goes to war with hope is it locks the door and makes me resolved to my own narrative, my own tragedy. But that's not

what John did in the story. He wasn't here. This lean into it. What John does is his doubt is a doorway to faith in this beautiful John knows where he is.

He knows where he is. He's he is not suppressing his doubt. He is not rejecting God's goodness. He is not rejecting his promise. He is not recoiling. He steps in and he steps in deeper by faith. How does he do it? In this posture of humility, in this posture of Lord, I'm maybe I missed it. Maybe I don't understand.

Please, Lord, but you do. And he sends a message through his disciples that is so humble, it's so vulnerable. And it's a question, are you the one? Are you the one? Do I need to look for another? Cause I'm still going to look. I'm not giving up. I'm still leaning in on faith. Do you see what's happening here?

It's beautiful. John's doubt isn't some wedge between him and God. It's actually the thing that's drawing him closer and deeper reliance by faith. So you cannot step into faith without falling on your knees and leaning into a God whose ways are not my ways. It's not. It's not faith. If I if I have this fully mapped out plan that I have made, and I'm going to say, God, you'll meet this, I have faith.

That's me trying to put God in a headlock. See, it's so important for us to see how many times in your life let me ask you this. How many times have you in your life? Have you been at a crossroads? Or you've taken a turn and you found yourself in a place you didn't want to be, or a place you're like, man, this can't be right because it's too scary.

And you go to the Lord and you fall down and you pray, Lord, give me clarity. How many of you have prayed for clarity? Yeah, right. Every single one of you. I cannot tell you how many times in my life I have fallen before the Lord faithfully fasted. Have searched the scriptures, and I have prayed. Lord Jesus, give me clarity.

Do you know how many times the Lord has given me clarity in my life? Zero. Not once, not once. He's given me faith. Sure, I felt burdens, I felt I felt convictions, but never clarity. See, clear

clarity is reserved for these protagonists and superheroes in these sort of shallow movie plots. You can just see that with certainty the direction they need to go.

That's not you and me. It's you're just too nuanced. You're too conflicted. You cannot find a single place in Scripture where God calls you to clarity as it relates to living out your Christian life. Clarity is an idol, and the Lord doesn't call us to that. Everywhere he calls it, he calls us to it, calls us to faith.

Second Corinthians five seven. Walk by faith, not by sight. The entirety of Hebrews chapter 11. What is it? It's just all about this, this Hall of Fame. And it's all about these people that were people that walked by faith, that died, by faith that suffered by faith, the people for whom the world was not worthy. It says despair turns us inward, but faith that the Lord calls us to pulls us towards Jesus as we live on and reliance on his perspective and on his in his power.

Man, how do we get there? How do we get there? You see, when you read Jesus's response to John and John saying, did I lose the plot line? If clarity, clarity were the marker of greatness, and this is when John would have been cut from the roster, but he doesn't. Jesus doesn't demote him. He calls him the greatest of all.

He says John is the greatest. In verse five he says, go and tell John what you hear and see the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news. Jesus answers this prophet who was charged with hearing the word of God. He answers him with the Word of God because he's quoting Isaiah.

In those moments. And what he's saying to him is, you are blessed is the one who is not offended with me, by me. Blessed is the one who can see that. I see what you don't see. Blessed is the one who's not going to demand. I give them clarity that will step forward like you just did John in faith and ask a better question and fall on my mercy that you will, that I will unfold it.

Blessed is the one that could sit in the gap between the expectation of God and God's reality. That doesn't walk away when Jesus smashes our homespun version of him. Because to be honest, we the only way you'll ever see your homespun Jesus is when Jesus take takes him

down to the studs and smashes him. Blessed is the one who brings even their doubt to him in faith.

Rather than running away. See, John's faith is not weak. John is not is. His faith is also not what rescues him is Jesus that rescues him in that moment. What he's saying is, Lord, I don't know. Jesus says, I do know, I know, you don't know. There are things you're not supposed to know. John didn't see the end of the story.

He didn't know Jesus would die and that he would resurrect from the dead. He didn't know how it all unfurls in the same we don't way. We don't know. So we all have stories that we lament. We all have a story. We didn't get what we wanted, that this didn't play out the way I thought it would. And that story is written in the blood of my expectations, and it's one that oftentimes I can't even read the whole thing because it's just too painful.

But we know the ending of this story and it's I don't know how it will unfold, unfold. In particular. I don't know the details of the way this unravels. I know that this story, that the story that Jesus is writing is written in the blood of Jesus, and it is a story that always ends in resurrection. John the Baptist didn't see that.

But we do, and it's a story we can lean into, and it's one that when our doubt comes because it's coming. If you'll feel it today, I promise you it's coming. And I want you to feel like, oh man, I feel no one should be like John the Baptist said, yes, Lord, I doubt and hold it up with each other that we can lean in and we can say, Lord, I don't know.

But I know how the story ends and I trust you. You're the one. We said this a couple weeks ago. You're the one who holds the story. You're the one who held it for John the Baptist, who was strong enough to hold it for him. You're strong enough to hold it for me. And I know it ends in resurrection, and I know it ends in glory.

And it will end eventually in the second coming that we anxiously await this advent season. Amen, Amen.