

We are in a Christmas series called *Behold*. We are looking at this amazing word that Scripture uses as a marker to say something important is coming. It's intended to do more than just make sure we're listening. It's intended to make us lean in, take notice, and absorb whatever is said so that it takes root in our heart. It's a word that is used multiple times in the Christmas story, and it declares the truth of who this baby born in Bethlehem is and what he's come to do.

This morning, we are going to see the word behold personified. It's found in another special baby born during this time, just before Jesus, in fact, who will become a walking declaration of the word behold. He is a character found in all four Gospels, and his presence, his words, and his ministry are all a declaration of who this baby is and what he's come to do. He is one who beholds himself and his life and ministry will help others do the same. The challenge before us this morning is to consider how we are following his example. To what extent do you behold and to what extent do we help others behold?

We begin with an announcement of his birth to his father Zechariah. He is a priest who is offering incense in the temple, which represents the prayers of the nation.

[SLIDE: Luke 1:11-17, 76-77] ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him 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."... ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

This is the announcement of the child who will grow up to be known as John the Baptist. He will fulfill the prophecy found in Malachi that speaks of a messenger to come. Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament, the last word from God to his people for 400 years until John begins his ministry around 30 years from now. Malachi tells them to be on the lookout for God's messenger who will be the forerunner to the sudden coming of the Lord to his temple. John is that man, and his arrival means God is on the move.

His mission will be to go before the Lord, ahead of him, to prepare the hearts of the people. He'll accomplish this through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The angel says he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, *even in his mother's womb*, which will be significant in what we look at next. God will use John to call his people back to him. He will be a reformer in the way Elijah was a reformer (1 Kings 17-18, Ahab/Jezebel/Baal worship) by calling them to repentance, turning from their own ways back to God, and giving them a sensitivity towards the Lord so they are prepared to receive their Messiah when he comes.

We got our Christmas tree last weekend and I was tempted to go all Clark Griswold. You remember that scene? Clark and his family are at a chop-down-your-own Christmas tree lot, they turn a corner, and Clark proclaims, “there it is!” His son responds with “Dad, that thing wouldn’t fit in our yard.” But Clark says, “It’s not going in our yard, Russ. It’s going in our living room!” That was what I wanted to do. We didn’t get a tree that large, but we did get one of some size. And there are very few houses prepared to just receive a tree in it. Before the tree is ever moved in, we had to make a way for it. We had to clear a path to get it in and then move obstacles, take things out of the room, and rearrange a lot of clutter (nothing like a Christmas tree to show you how much clutter you have), to prepare it so that, ultimately, the tree could be in the center of it as the focal point of the room.

That’s the work John will be sent to do. **[SLIDE] A heart prepared for the Lord is one with room at the center.** He will be removing the spiritual clutter of his people. He will call them to turn back to God, carve a path to make room for him at the center of their lives, and receive him there when he comes.

You and I sing about this spiritual practice every Christmas. *Joy to the World* says, “Let every heart prepare him room”. It is the purpose of Advent, that we would take an assessment of our hearts to see what spiritual clutter is there, remove it and turn back to the Lord as our only hope, and receive and celebrate our Savior at Christmas by putting him back in the center of our lives.

John is going to begin this work at a very early time in his life. Last week we read about Mary receiving the news of her own baby, and the sign the angel gave her was that her old and barren relative Elizabeth is pregnant. So Mary goes with haste and what she encounters will confirm all she was told.

[SLIDE: Luke 1:39-45] ³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Mary travels for several days to visit her relative, and as she greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaped for joy. Remember what the angel told Zechariah. John would be filled with the Spirit, even in his mother’s womb. In some way, he already recognizes and responds to the presence of the Messiah. Even in the womb, he’s calling attention to God. All of this is an indication of what’s to come in John’s life and ministry. The Spirit also fills Elizabeth and leads her to tell of what has happened in her womb and to speak of the baby in Mary’s womb. Both of their responses show us that **[SLIDE] Beholding is the work of the Spirit.** He reveals to us who Jesus is, and out of that revelation is where our ministry comes from. Before we go for God, we must first know God. John recognizes his presence through the Spirit, and that same Spirit will be at work in John’s life and ministry and in those John will minister to.

The Gospels tell us that John grew up and lived apart in the wilderness until the word of the Lord came to him. He began to proclaim that word, calling people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and communicating God's offer of salvation through that forgiveness since it was a precondition of peace with God. As he did so, people began to show up, confess and repent of their sins, be baptized, and seek forgiveness. They were a people being prepared, a people who were turning back to the Lord, a people who were removing spiritual clutter and making him room. As they did so, they were also becoming sensitive and responsive to what John said next. His mission was more than talking about the need for forgiveness. It was to help people behold the person who would make that possible.

[SLIDE: John 1:29-34] ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

The person who made John leap for joy in the womb now moves John to leap with the declaration that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He's telling those who have responded to his message "This is the guy. He's the one I've been talking about. He's the one you have been preparing for. You have turned to the Lord and sought forgiveness for your sins, and this is the Son of God who will make that possible." But his message also declares how that will be made possible. From the very beginning, we are given an indication of what Jesus's ministry is going to be. He is to become the sacrificial lamb spoken of by the prophet Isaiah to be made for the forgiveness of sins. **Jesus, the Lamb of God, will take away the sins of the world by taking on the sins of the world.**

John's ministry did not last much longer than this moment. In fact, as people started to flock to Jesus, John said "He must increase. I must decrease." He would ultimately be arrested and executed by Herod Antipas. The entire nation did not turn to the Lord, did not receive their Messiah, as they one day will, but John faithfully lived out his mission and prepared a people for the coming of the Lord. He beheld the Messiah and was used by God to help others do so.

[SLIDE] Behold the Lamb of God.

I believe for most of us, if we're honest, there are times in our lives when the gospel can get stale. We believe. We have been saved by God. But the wonder of it all is diminished. We've forgotten how to behold. We can remedy that by remembering why he came and what he did for us. We do that by celebrating Christmas with an eye on the cross. It's never fun to talk about sin, and it's even less fun to do so during Christmas, but I believe that the more we do so, the more meaningful and impactful this holiday will be.

I have told you all my testimony before, and it includes a significant moment in 1999 in the middle of the night. I had been a believer since my youth but had drifted. Thankfully I was in a

study on the book of Matthew to try and figure things out. We were focusing on the Sermon on the Mount, and God showed up. It was both the darkest and lightest moment of my life. By his grace, by the work of the Spirit, God showed me how far I was from him, my depravity, my sin. But he didn't leave me there. My heart had been prepared to receive him afresh, and he reminded me that he had paid for it and that I was forgiven. In the midst of great conviction I was filled with abundant grace. I beheld the Lamb of God like never before, recommitted my life to Christ, and I've been on a different trajectory ever since. When was the last time you beheld the Lamb?

The more we behold the gravity of our sin, the more we will behold the one who has forgiven it. Since the Spirit is the one who causes us to behold, would you pray this week that he would help you do so, particularly if the good news has become old news? As you do so, trust that there is a leap of joy in store for you when you behold the Lamb once again.

And if you have never beheld, if you are not a follower of Jesus, I tell you this morning the offer many of us have accepted is also made to you. Your sin has separated you from God forever, but he has made a way back to him through Jesus. It is a gift to be accepted by faith. You can do that now, in our prayer rooms, or talk to one of us. If you do that, whether it's the first time or a renewed time, I believe something else will happen.

[SLIDE] Once you behold, you can't keep hold.

If you truly behold what the Lamb of God has done for you, I don't think you can keep it to yourself. Beginning in his mother's womb, John the Baptist grew in his recognition of and devotion to who Jesus was and what he came to do. His purpose was to bear witness and reveal Jesus to Israel. We have that same opportunity. You may not call a group of people a brood of vipers like he did, but one way is to invite someone to our Christmas Eve services. Martha and I moved to a new house last summer and the neighbors on our new street have a progressive Christmas dinner every year. We will be hosting the first stop and I'll be making these available. Maybe that's your first step. If you are reluctant, go back to the first point and ask God to help you behold the Lamb of God. The more you behold, the more you can help others behold. It is ultimately the work of the Spirit. Our role is to bear witness faithfully and let him do the work.

I want to close this morning with a story of one of our own: Anthony Brewer. Anthony started attending our church this year and, unfortunately, passed away unexpectedly a few weeks ago. I had the honor of officiating his memorial service and want to share with you some of what I said that day because I believe he lived out what we have seen this morning.

My favorite memory of Anthony happened recently. After service one day, he apologized for falling asleep during one of my sermons. I said if he fell asleep during my sermon, he probably wasn't the one who needed to apologize! But I recognized he was a man of character.

It was all the more impressive because I learned that Anthony did not always live the easiest life. At age seventeen, he made a significant mistake and had to pay a huge price for it. A sentence was handed down that Anthony had to serve...twenty years in fact. But the glory of Anthony's life is that he was given another sentence he will never have to serve. It's the same sentence you and I have been given, and we don't have to serve it either. It's a death sentence that comes from

our sin. But Anthony beheld the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sentence he was supposed to serve was served instead by Jesus, and Anthony's sins were forgiven.

When he got out, Anthony participated in a Christian halfway house called Metanoya, and it was there he became aware of his purpose. He had beheld the Lamb of God, and he couldn't keep hold. He began mentoring other guys coming out of prison to get them on the right path, and he did so by pointing them to a life-changing relationship with Jesus. He was so committed that those involved began to call him Brother Anthony. It became his passion. But rather than take my word for it, take his. Anthony wrote his wife Nereyda a series of letters and she was gracious enough to let me share one.

“All we have to do is trust God and what He allows. I know He has so much in store for us and is going to bless us so much to where people are going to be affected by our testimony. People are going to be moved by what God has done for us and see how powerful God's word is and what He does for those who remain faithful to His word. This isn't a test, it's a testimony, and we, as His children must spread His word as well as live by it. The Lord has shown us so much favor even in the midst of our storms. Watch and see what our God can and will do. I trust that if we remain grounded in His word, the blessings will be plentiful enough to pass them on to others who are in need of them. God has a mission for me to share His word and to go out and share my testimony, to share our testimony.”

Someone once said you can tell a lot about a man by where he sits in church. I don't know if that's true for everyone, but it was true for Anthony. Every Sunday, Anthony sat front and center. Nobody sits front and center! But I think Anthony sat there because he knew he had nothing to hide. He had experienced the grace and forgiveness of Jesus and felt free to sit there because he had been set free. It's a message he declared with his life, and I wanted to give him one more opportunity to declare it in death.

Anthony beheld the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and he wanted everyone to know about it so they could behold too. This Christmas, ask the Spirit to help you prepare him room in your heart, to help you behold the Lamb of God, and to help your life be a testimony, a declaration, of the one who comes to take away everyone's sin. Oh if that could be true of all of us it would be a sight to behold.