

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

When we consider John the Baptizer we think of a rugged and rough man.
We remember his locust breath, his camel-hair look, and his river water stench.

With John we have a man who's not afraid to call it like it is.
"You brood of vipers," he says, "You snakes!"

He's a true individual that doesn't care what you think of him.
No pretense.
No mask.
No hiding behind appearances.
Just John with all his imperfections and ugliness.

But for all of John's oddities, he's no Stoic.
He's not without emotion.
In fact, he's deeply emotional, caught up with and sympathetic to all mankind.
John might be the most unlikely figure for pure compassion—
but that's who he was.

And in that, maybe we've had a misinformed picture of John—
or maybe it just hasn't been rounded out yet.

For at least in Luke's Gospel, the John we meet is a John whose work is entirely in the way of
the Gospel.

It's never John standing aloof from the people, but right in their midst, before their face,
probably even with tears in his eyes.

Luke presents him as a prophet,
just like the prophets of the Old Testament.

Luke opens chapter 3 as if he's re-writing the prophecy of John.
It's what we call a superscription, just like in Isaiah or Haggai or many of the others,
locating the Word of the Lord in time and place:

**"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,
Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea,
and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee,
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,
the word of God came to John
the son of Zechariah
in the wilderness."** (Lk 3:1-2)

Compare that with the opening verses of Zechariah or Jeremiah.
 It's always in the year of this or that king, that the Word of the Lord *comes*.
 And it always comes to a man, the son of another man.

The prophets are never just floating about without lineage, without ancestry.

And this prophet, this John, shares the same sort of sympathy that all prophets share.
 Moses loved his fellow Hebrews; so rather than letting God destroy them for their sin,
 Moses stood before God and prayed with all he had that God would turn from His anger.
 Amos was the same way, seeing the destruction coming, he cried out,
“O Lord God, no! Repent! Please stop!” (Amos 7:5)
 And Jeremiah, lamenting the coming exile, pleaded for the Lord's mercy.

So it is for John.
 He's no hell-fire and brimstone preacher.
 There's no judgment, or superiority, or apartness with John and the people.
 He sees himself as one of them, bound with them.
 That's how he cares for them.

But when you care for someone so deeply,
 you do things and say things that they need to hear and see, whether they want it, or not.

When you really care, you stop beating around the bush, you quit making excuses, or putting it off, you quit hiding.
 When you really care, you act without constraint—
 you forget about what might make you look bad, and you do it all for the other.

That's John.
 That's why he dresses and eats and smells the way he does.

It's not for show.
 It's not simply trying to stand out or apart or disconnected from what's acceptable.
 He does it because he has no concern in the world except that
“all flesh see the salvation of God” (Lk 3:6).

He prepares the way.
 He is the “voice,” that Isaiah prophesied.
 He is the mouthpiece of God that fills the valleys and lowers the mountains and straightens the crooked and levels the rough places.

He doesn't dance around the truth but shouts it loud and clear for all to hear.
 What Peter says on the day of Pentecost is straightforward John the baptizer talk:
“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself” (Acts 2:38-39).

John preaches a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*.
 It's not a baptism of works or an outward sign of an inward decision.
 It's not a symbol of your inclusion into God's family or physical picture of a spiritual truth.

Baptism, at least as John saw it, actually did something.
 Something was actually given, delivered, bestowed, effected.
 In baptism, in this washing with water attached to the Word, the forgiveness of sins took place.
 There, in this baptism for forgiveness, you actually *see the salvation of God*.

That's why he does it.
 He's emotional like that.
 He cares for Israel like that—
 for he actually believes that by this baptism they will be saved.

But this baptism was not just plain water.

No, it wasn't just washing up for dinner, or the sort of wash you do when coming in from outside.
 It was a prophetic washing, a washing included and combined with God's word.
 So it was a washing of repentance.

To go for John's baptism is to admit guilt and wrong doing.
 There's no going back, or part way, or half-hearted repentance—
 it's saying that you've wrecked it all;
 and all you have going is this watery promise of forgiveness.

This is the fruit worthy of repentance:
 Humility, Confession, and Trust.

No one who recognizes their guilt wants to do it again.
 So in our right of private confession we say:
 "I'm sorry for all of this, I ask for grace, I want to do better."

Those are the words of faith.

John wants us to do better.
 And we do best by repenting; that is, by confessing and believing.

The life of confession is the baptismal life lived out.
 That's why Luther can say,
 *"When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a
 Christian. If I have brought you to the point of being a Christian, I have thereby also
 brought you to Confession."*¹

Hell is reserved for those who don't confess their sin, who have no real guilt—no repentance.
 It's for those that would rather have it their way, of strength and pride, and never being wrong.

¹ Martin Luther, "A Brief Exhortation to Confession, 1529," 32.

And that's where John is best.
That's where he cares most of all.
He, like our Lord, desires that all be saved, that all come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4).

He preaches and pleads with everyone he can that they be wrong.
That they admit their wrong, their failure, their sin.

In many and various ways, John *begged, pleaded with,* and *exhorted* the people to repentance.

And so it goes today.
Forsake yourself.
Leave behind your self-made strength and go-it-alone attitude,
and cling to Christ who alone baptizes you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

He alone joins Himself to you and you to Him in this watery forgiveness.
He alone gives the Holy Spirit.
He alone takes your sin to Himself and puts upon you His salvation.

That's repentance.
Guilt and forgiveness, confession and belief.

Thanks be to God for John the Baptizer,
who cares enough, is emotional and sympathetic enough,
to do whatever it takes to call us back to this Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit