

SERMON SERIES:  
**GOD IS WITH US**  
Witnesses to His Coming

Grace Christian Church  
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## **JOHN THE BAPTIST (Mark 1:1-11; Malachi 3:1-2,16-18)**

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### **Introduction**

The past year I have found myself quite distressed at times as I have watched things unfold in the United States. COVID-19 raging out of control, racial tensions bubbling to the surface again, political chaos, violence – sometimes it is more than I can take in – and yet I can't stop checking the news to find out what is happening. It seems impossible that it can get any worse, and yet it does.

And the church in the US is also of great concern. As it aligns itself with one side or the other of the political divide it gets sucked into the chaos, it has said and done some unbelievable things. And we continue to get revelations of the moral hypocrisy of too many Christian pastors and leaders who preach holiness but have a lifestyle that is far from holy. It is no wonder that many young people are turned away from Christ by the church instead of brought to Him.

My heart is sick to see the devastation in the United States and its church community.

Many people have said that the problem is a lack of good leadership – if we just had the right people in the right positions, with the freedom and power to make the needed changes, things would get better. The country – and the church – is just suffering from poor leadership. But I wonder ... is that the real problem?

### **John the Baptist**

- His situation

Israel, at the time of John the Baptist, had some of the same issues – although worked out in different ways. The land was occupied by the Romans who exploited the people and were indifferent to their welfare. The Jewish leaders fought for power and were willing to support the local Roman rulers in order to hold on to that power. Nobody cared much about the average person trying to live and raise a family.

The religious leaders had substituted a relationship with God with a multitude of rules and regulations that were almost impossible to keep. Also, they had aligned themselves with various power blocks in order to hold on to their positions. All this had forced people away from God rather than drawn them close to Him. People were desperate and looking for someone to come and rescue them. They were looking for a leader called the Messiah who would rescue them from the Romans and re-establish the land for them - would right all wrongs and bring prosperity and peace to them once again. They were looking for a better leader to fix the situation.

- His identity (v.2,3,6)

It is into this situation that John the Baptist comes. Although as Zechariah's son he could have served as a priest in the Temple, it is as prophet and not a priest that he comes. After 400 years of no prophets, of God not speaking to His people, John the Baptist comes as the final prophet to Israel. As a prophet, he is outside the religious and political establishments and is not limited by them. As a prophet, he is able to challenge all people - Pharisees and tax collectors, Roman soldiers and ordinary Jewish workers and even Herod Antipas, the local ruler. (Luke 3:1-19) As a prophet, his ministry is in the wilderness, not a place of power, but of repentance and testing for the Jews.

And, as a prophet, his job is to point to God and what He is doing - not to make the changes himself, but to prepare the way for God to come and put things right. Malachi reflects on this coming, saying, "And who will be able to stand and face Him when He appears?" When God comes, it will not be an easy victory for the Jews. They will be judged first.

- His message (v.4)

So, what does John the Baptist have to say? What was His message? First, John acknowledges the NEED. And what is the need? Is it for a new human leader to overthrow the Roman oppression? Is it for a new religious leader who will re-make Judaism? No – John starts somewhere totally different. John says the first need is for them to repent and turn to God. The problem wasn't the Roman or Jewish leaders. The problem was the sin in their own hearts.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was a Russian writer and dissident who lived during Stalin's rule. He was imprisoned in a Russian work camp, a Gulag, for his views and was later exiled from Russia. His greatest book is a study of those Gulags and how people came to think that it was OK to treat people so badly. He says:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either but right through every human heart and through all human hearts. (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago*)

You see, we like to think that we and people who think like us are "good" and anyone else is "evil". When we think like that, the goal becomes to get rid of anyone we see as evil and look for a leader who will help us to do that. This is the polarity which has become so strong in the US and was prevalent in John's time as well. But we can't draw a simple line between good and evil like that. The problem is not the Romans or the pharisees; the political left or the political right; the white or the black – the problem is within each one of us because all of us have a sin problem. All of us need to repent and turn to God. Salvation will not come from a better, stronger leader to champion our cause. It only comes from turning away from our own sin and turning to God. It was bringing people to this realisation which would prepare people to receive the God's salvation through the Messiah. This was the job John had come to do.

And as they repented of their sins and turned to God, they were baptised. This baptism did not bring forgiveness of sins, but it signified that they acknowledged their need to be forgiven and that they were looking to God to provide that forgiveness when the Messiah came. It was a sign that they were now a part of the believing remnant of Israel which was looking to God for salvation.

We read in 1 Chronicles 7:14 about this remnant, "*If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.*" The second part of the Malachi passage we read talks about this also. It says that "*those who feared the LORD*"

were written in “a scroll of remembrance, a record of those who feared him and always thought about the honour of his name” (Malachi 3:16,17). These people will be spared or forgiven when God comes in judgement. This is a group of people who have turned from their sin and turned to God and these are the people to whom God will bring forgiveness and blessing.

And this is the HOPE that John offers. God is coming – not just a new human leader. And when He comes, He will take away their sins. In John’s Gospel, when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he exclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29 NLT) This statement would have been full of meaning for his Jewish audience. They knew all about sacrificial lambs. But it would also have caused them to wonder, because the Lamb was a sign of sacrifice and weakness – not what they were expecting from a strong leader like the Messiah.

And there is more! While John can baptise them with water to signify their repentance, when God comes, He will not only forgive them, but baptise them with the Holy Spirit, giving them new life and a new relationship with Himself. (Mark 1:8) This is the hope of those who have turned to God. This is what the Messiah will bring.

## Jesus

- His identity

The focus of Mark’s account now turns to Jesus. Before we get to His baptism, however, we need to go back to the first couple of verses in the book to see how Mark introduces Jesus. He has chosen a few very important things to say in the first few words of his gospel. We’ll look at the ESV translation as it brings out what we need to see better:

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Messiah), the Son of God.  
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet ...*

The very first word takes us back to the first word in the Bible – “beginning”. By using it as the first word in his account of the life of Jesus, commentators believe that he is deliberately saying that this is something new that God is doing – a new creation, a new work of God. Jesus is unlike anything that has come before.

But although it is something new, it is also deeply tied into all that has gone before. In the next few words, Mark makes three allusions to God’s work with Israel. First, Jesus is called the Messiah – the promised one who will bring God’s salvation. Secondly, He is the Son of God – a title given to David and to the ultimate King who would come from the line of David. Finally, he is shown to be the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus is both something totally new AND a continuation of all that has come before. He is the next step, in fact the climax, in God’s eternal plan to bring us back into relationship with Himself.

- His Baptism

John has been baptising people for a while when Jesus turns up at the Jordan River. We read in other accounts that John objects to baptising Jesus, saying Jesus should be baptising him instead! We may wonder why Jesus wanted to be baptised. He didn’t need to repent and turn to God. Most commentators feel that Jesus did it to publicly identify himself with those who were the faithful remnant, those who were seeking after God. It is a bit like public figures who are choosing to be vaccinated on camera to support the immunisation efforts. Some of those people may already have some immunity from having had COVID-19, but they are choosing to be vaccinated publicly to show that they support immunisation and are part of the group of people who are doing the right thing and want to encourage others to do it as well.

- His commissioning

But then God chooses to use this event to do something far greater. His baptism became His commissioning. When Jesus comes up out of the water *“he saw the heavens splitting part and the Holy Spirit descending on him”*. This was an announcement of God coming to intervene in human history. Isaiah says:

*Oh, that you would tear apart the heavens and come down! (similar words to Mark)  
How the mountains would quake in your presence!  
As fire causes wood to burn and water to boil,  
your coming would make the nations tremble.  
Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!*

God is announcing to all who had eyes to see, that Jesus was sent by God. And with God's coming in Jesus, the Holy Spirit also comes – another sign of the coming of God, the coming of the Messiah. In John's gospel, John the Baptist says that when he saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, then he knew that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

But there is another dimension to the commissioning. I think we have here a glimpse of the love within the Trinity as Jesus begins His public ministry – the culmination of all that God had been doing throughout history. It reminds me a bit of when we sent Ian off to Denmark more than a year ago now. Although Scott was going with him, we took a moment as we said goodbye to, in a sense, commission him into the next stage of his life. There were hugs – and tears; we prayed for him and committed him to God's care; we let him know how much we loved him and expressed our confidence in his ability to do a good job. It was an emotional time! I think this is a little of what is happening here. The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus – a bit like a strengthening hug. The Father gives Jesus a blessing – telling Him how much He is loved and enjoyed. And Jesus goes forth in obedience and trust. It is as if the Trinity takes a moment together before launching Jesus into His public ministry.

## **Today**

But what does all this mean for us today? To go back to where we started, life can be distressing and confusing. We want someone to save us from the evil we perceive around us. We want someone to fix the problems we face. I think it is this desire, at least in part, which has gotten the U.S. into such a mess. They have looked to leaders – both political and religious – to save them and solve their problems. They have elevated those leaders and given them too much power. But human leaders cannot solve the real NEED – the sinfulness in our own hearts. Our only HOPE is in God who can forgive our sins and fill us with His Spirit. All we need to do is turn away from our sin and turn to Him. And the amazing thing is that God does this because He LOVES us. Jesus said:

*“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in His love.” (John 15:9,10)*

Jesus came to make a way for us to overcome the evil in our own hearts and be re-united with Him in love. Behold the Lamb of God!