

Behold! A Voice Speaks

Matthew 3:13-17

Introduction

Today we conclude our seven week series titled: **BEHOLD!**

In these past seven weeks, you have heard 11 different sermons in which we have searched to discover the nearly hidden truth revealed whenever we see that word “Behold.” The previous six Sunday morning sermons have all described events that occurred when Jesus was a baby, from the time before He was conceived through the arrival of the Magi.

Today we fast forward nearly 30 years. Jesus is now ready to begin His earthly ministry. We didn't miss much in those 30 years. Apart from one story when Jesus was 12 years old, the gospels reveal nothing about the childhood of Jesus. That's because the Gospel writers were not writing the **BIOGRAPHY** of Jesus. They were **writing the story of salvation** that comes through Jesus.

As was true last week, we find the word “behold” twice in today's text. Both times the “behold” happens following the actual baptismal event. Both occur as Jesus comes up out of the water.

The setting is the Jordan River. John the Baptist – you remember him from week 2 of this series – has been preaching a fire-and-brimstone style sermon for a few years now, calling the people in his audience to repent of their sins and be baptized so they would be ready for the coming Messiah. His words to them were harsh and direct:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matthew 3:7-8)

And again ...

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. (Matthew 3:10)

John warned his audience that being good Jews would not be enough to save them. Salvation was not going to be given on the basis of a family heritage:

And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (Matthew 3:9)

That was shocking news! For thousands of years, the Jewish people had counted on being “God's chosen people,” thinking that was enough to keep them on God's “good list.” As a result of John's preaching, people began to repent! And as they did, John would baptize them ... thus earning his nickname (the Baptist) in the process:

People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Matthew 3:5-6)

It was at one of these major baptismal events that Jesus makes His first public appearance. He is just starting His ministry – and surprise! – Jesus comes forward to be baptized! Imagine that! The sinless Son of God participating in a baptismal event that is couched in the language of repentance!

John, quite obviously and understandably, objects to the whole idea. He knows Jesus is sinless. He knows Jesus has nothing to repent for. But nonetheless Jesus insists. So, like every other person who has come to the Jordan River that day, John baptizes Jesus. And then it happens. BEHOLD! Not once but twice. BEHOLD!

#1: THE HEAVENS OPENED

At the first behold, the heavens open up:

Behold the heavens were opened ... (Matthew 3:16)

There are two other instances in Scripture where that phrase is used: Isaiah 64:1 and Ezekiel 11:1. In both instances, the context of the passage describes how at a particular point in time God chooses to enter the human story and rescue His people. His people are in trouble and He comes to save them. The heavens are opened, and salvation is on its way.

My favorite hymn has the phrase “the clouds be rolled back as a scroll.” When the hymn writer wrote those words, he was overwhelmed with grief at the tragic death of his family. In that moment he pictures the heavens opening and he knows that all is well with his soul. That’s what I picture happening here.

The Biblical image to keep in mind happens at the end of Jesus’ ministry. As He dies on the cross in the middle of a sunny afternoon on Good Friday, the sky goes completely black, the earth starts to shake, and the huge curtain in the Temple is ripped in two:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. (Matthew 27:51-52a)

That was the curtain that hid the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant from human eyes. You and I would never be permitted behind the curtain. That was the dwelling place of God – the most holy place in all the world. It reminded all who saw it that none of us is worthy to be in the presence of God.

But on the day Jesus died, that curtain was torn in two. From top to bottom. From the heavens to the earth. The barrier that separated mankind from God was eliminated,

signaling the heavens were opened. Our sins were paid for. Salvation was available for those who would choose to receive it.

John knew that Jesus had no sin that needed to be washed away. He knew that Jesus had nothing to repent about. All those other people who had come to the Jordan ... they had sins. You and I have sins. We all need the cleansing waters of baptism to wash away our sin and make us clean.

But even on this day Jesus knew the end of the story. He knew that in a matter of three short years every sin that ever had been and ever would be committed would be laid on His shoulders.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

It was for those sins the sinless Jesus was baptized. It was those sins that were washed away in the Jordan River when Jesus was baptized that day. And so when Jesus came up out of the water ...

Behold the heavens were opened ... (Matthew 3:16)

The barrier between us and heaven was rolled back like a scroll. But that's not all ...

#2: THE VOICE SPOKE

At the second behold, a voice from heaven speaks:

Behold, a voice from the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

Those words seem sort of ordinary, don't they? There isn't a lot of energy in them. At first I thought my perception was because I knew these words so well, so I tried over and over again to say them in a way that conveyed excitement. I couldn't do it.

How relieved I was when I turned to the commentators for help. They all said the same thing! There was no way to easily translate the enthusiasm of these words from the Greek to the English. It was all tied up in the different tenses of the words used. One commentator said this:

Nothing comes close to the ineffable complacency which is manifestly intended.

That wasn't very helpful. But this translation was:

Then suddenly the voice of the Father shouted from the sky, saying, "This is the Son I love, and my greatest delight is in him." (Matthew 3:17, TPT)

Those words would remind the audience gathered that day of another passage of Scripture.

*Take a good look at my servant! I love him dearly, for he is my chosen one.
(Isaiah 42:1)*

The voice from heaven doesn't just affirm Jesus. It shouts to all who would hear "Take a good look at Him." He is the way in which you are able to walk through the open doors of heaven and spend life with the Heavenly Father. Behold! Look closely! This is not just another baptized sinner. This is the Messiah! It is your sins that have been washed away. Because of Him, you can have eternal life!

To accent this behold, the entire Trinity shows up for the occasion. The Father speaking from heaven, the Son emerging from the water and the Spirit descending as a dove. Don't miss it! It's a matter of eternal life and death.

APPLICATION

I have never been to the Holy Land. Someday perhaps God will allow that happen. But meantime I rely on the stories others tell me and wonderful video resources like the one that will be featured in our Adult Sunday School starting next week (January 17). So I don't know firsthand what the Jordan River looks like.

Here, though, is my understanding of what I would see:

The Jordan River originates at the top of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Israel. It stands over 9,000 feet above sea level and boasts some of the most majestic images of snowcapped mountains in the world. It is thought by scholars to be the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus (a story we will talk about in five weeks).

As the snow melts on the top of this mountain, the water flows in the Jordan River to the lowest point on earth, the Dead Sea. For the most part the Jordan River is neither beautiful nor peaceful. It is composed of 25 percent mud and plunges down the mountainside at a furious pace, falling nine feet per mile.

This river has influenced the course of history, even beyond the pages of Scripture. Today thirty miles of this river serves as a barrier between the hostile nations of Israel and Syria. Across it, those two nations are in constant tension with each other.

East of Jericho there is a peaceful and beautiful bend in the river called "the Ford of the Partridge." It is a place that is shaded by willow trees and eucalyptus trees, just as it was in New Testament times. According to church tradition, that was the location where John baptized Jesus.

Please hear the significance of what I have just described to you, for it describes our situation as well. The place of our baptism is very much a spot of beauty and peace, but it is also a point of division between two forces that are in constant tension with one

another. There is always an ongoing battle for your soul. At times you might feel that more powerfully than you do at others, but the tension is always there.

There is a fascinating story in the 10th chapter of John's gospel. In it the Jewish leaders want to stone Jesus because they believed He had committed blasphemy. The text reads:

Once again they attempted to seize him, but he escaped miraculously^[a] from their clutches. Then Jesus went back to the place where John had baptized him at the crossing of the Jordan. (John 10:39-40)

When the circumstances of life came crashing in on Him, Jesus found peace and refuge by returning to and remembering His baptism.

And so can we. When difficulties seem more than we can bear, remember that you a child of God. Because of what Jesus did on this day, the heavens are opened for all of us. Your sins have been washed away. Life comes into proper perspective when we come to the Jordan.

Whatever you may be carrying this day, bring it to the Jordan. And behold!

Amen.