

When God Challenges Matthew 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION

Most weekday mornings – not all, but most – I get up before anyone else in our house. If I do, I very much enjoy going into the family room and sitting in “my spot” on the couch. I don’t turn on the lights. I don’t turn on the TV. I don’t look at my phone. I just sit and enjoy the silence. For me it is a wonderful time.

I fully understand though that silence is not golden for many other people. If you live alone – especially if you are alone because of the death of a spouse – silence is anything but pleasant. In those instances, you long for the sound of a certain voice. You might even strain a bit to see if you can hear it.

The days before Jesus was born was a time of silence. For the people of God, it was not a wonderful time – like the silence I enjoy. Rather it was rather distressing. They longed to hear the voice of God, but it had been 400 years since God had said anything.

- There were no prophets running around, proclaiming “Thus saith the Lord.”

In the past when the people were in trouble God would send a prophet – like Isaiah – who would tell them what God was thinking and planning. Our first reading today is a great example of that. In it the prophet provided the people with words of hope as the Assyrian army was closing in. He said that a day was coming when ...

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him... (Isaiah 11:1-2)

The Jewish people knew that was a promise directly from God that the Messiah would come ... some day. A promise in the future, but still a word of God in a time of trouble.

- Over the subsequent years, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians all conquered the nation of Israel and ruled over them. And through every one of those troubled times God continued to speak.
- But then ... suddenly ... He stopped speaking.

Scholars generally agree that the last of the Old Testament books to be written was Malachi, penned somewhere around 450 B.C.E. The last two verses of Malachi – the last words of God before the silence began – are these:

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. (Malachi 4:5-6)

And then nothing. Just silence.

Until John the Baptist came in Matthew 3. And when he came, his message was quite challenging! John did not bring ...

- Words of hope and comfort.
- Words of rescue from the hands of the oppressive Romans.

Instead, through John God issued a challenge to His people.

Our theme this Advent is:

Experience the Wonder

During this season I have invited you to come with me on a journey into the Christmas story to experience once again – and perhaps in a new way – the awe-inspiring wonder of a story we know very well. We want to find those “wow” moments.

The story of Christmas cannot be told without John the Baptist. On Thursday we focused on his father Zechariah. This coming Thursday we will talk about his mother Elizabeth. They are key characters in this drama.

And what an interesting character John was! Our text confirms that he is the Elijah promised by God in Malachi and prophesied about in Isaiah. But this guy – wow – he was something else. Not at all what anyone expected! Look how he is described:

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. (Matthew 3:4)

After 400 years of silence, God sends ... John.

CHALLENGE #1: REPENT OF YOUR SINS

Apollo 13 was supposed to be the third mission to land on the moon, but during a routine stirring of the oxygen tanks an explosion happened causing the oxygen to be expelled into the atmosphere. The lunar mission was canceled and the crew was forced to head for earth.

In order to make it all the systems of the command module had to be shut down and descent had to happen from the much smaller lunar module. There came a point in time when all communication stopped. The NASA computers had calculated to the exact second when communication should be re-established, but that time came and went. What was supposed to be four minutes became six.

Several calls from Houston Space Center went unanswered: “Odyssey this is Houston. Over.” Silence.

Finally Jim Lovell returned the message with these words: “OK Joe.”
Everyone around the world celebrated!

After 400 years of silence the first word uttered by the voice of God through the prophet was “Repent!”

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. (Matthew 3:2)

That wasn't a new challenge from God. He has been speaking through most of the prophets of the Old Testament to deliver the same word.

- Repent or I will send the Assyrians
- Repent or the Babylonians will carry you into exile

But after 400 years of silence? The people were hoping for something a little more hopeful!

- Something like "I have heard your cries and will deliver you from the evil tyranny of the Romans."
- But they got "repent" instead.

When the Bible talks about repentance, it is challenging us to re-orient our lives. You may have heard this before, but "repent" is a military term meaning "about face." You were walking toward sin, but you repent – and turn around to walk away from it with the power of the Holy Spirit guiding your steps.

The Jewish people had been rebellion against God for most of their history. They ignored His standards and chased the ways of the culture around them. Sound familiar? God challenges us all to "repent."

CHALLENGE #2: RECOGNIZE THE BASIS FOR YOUR HOPE

Look at verse 9:

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)

The Jews had – and most still have – the mistaken notion that they have special status in the eyes of God because of their Jewish lineage. The second challenge is to realize that heritage doesn't equate with good standing before God.

- The God who created the universe can transform even the rocks on the hillside into something with a specific bloodline.
- Great grandpa Abraham can't get you to heaven.

Only Jesus can. He clearly teaches:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

It is not through Abraham, but through Jesus, that our salvation is achieved. That's really good news for us, because we can't trace our lineage back to Abraham.

- How many people do you know who believe themselves to have an inside track because "grandma" was a good Christian?
- Or they live in a so-called "Christian nation?"

Don't fool yourselves, John challenges. It is only Jesus that saves.

APPLICATION

Many years ago C.S. Lewis wrote the Screwtape Letters. Screwtape was an assistant devil writing to his nephew Wormwood. Screwtape was telling his nephew how to make the "patient" leave the camp of the arch enemy, the Prince of Peace, and dwell in the camp of the real boss, the prince of darkness. It is a great read! I would like to share with you one of those letters.

Dear Wormwood,

I have read the notices that you are about to graduate and begin your work on earth. Glad to hear that your training went well. I see that you will be a graduate with honors. Splendid!

Apply all of your knowledge to the task at hand, for the enemy, the Prince of Peace, God of Love is a resourceful enemy. Just when you think you have him in your grasp or one of this people, he pulls a trick and low and behold you stand empty, you lost your soul for the fires of hell.

I would like to give you one piece of advice, one bit of wisdom as you begin your tour of duty in the enemy's camp. Throughout my tour of duty, I have learned one thing about these humans which I feel can be so very useful for you.

Humans usually have a very high regard for themselves. They think they are pretty good. They can see the faults, the sins, the evil in another, but they see only good in themselves.

My advice to you my dear nephew, is to encourage that thinking. Encourage it for all its worth.

The chief antagonist, that Christ fellow, wants the humans to see their own sins, but nephew, blind their eyes, their hearts, their souls to that revelation. Let them think only of the good in themselves, and you will meet your quota of human beings who will spend the rest of their lives with our master, the lord of the heat and fire, Master Satan.

Let them see that when repentance is called for it is not them who needs to repent. Let them see over and over again that they are really better than the guy next to them in the pew. When the pastor reads about John the Baptist, let them fall asleep, turn to other thoughts, so they will not realize that it is them John is talking to. Let them see that they are indeed really pretty good, no need for repentance, no need for forgiveness, and then you will have them. You will have them because they will see that they do not really need that Christ fellow, and they really need is themselves. Then, then they will be ours.

For you see my dear Wormwood, when these humans see themselves as great, then they are filled with self pride, and they don't need that Jesus fellow. This is how it will begin. They you will have them in your claws.

Good luck on your tour of duty, my heart goes out to you as you use every trick, every scheme, every evil desire, every good intention, every proud thought to win souls for our side.

Your admiring uncle, Screwtape

Amen.