

# The Dawn is Breaking

## Matthew 3:1-12

### Introduction

Listen to these words of God as spoken to and through the prophet Malachi:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6)

Those are the final words of the Old Testament. They were written about 400 BCE. That is, about 400 years before the birth of Jesus.

After that ... nothing. Nada. Not a word. After speaking these final words to Malachi, God went silent. For 400 years, He went silent. No Scripture was written. There were no prophets or other messengers, proclaiming "Thus saith the Lord." There are no recorded words of inspiration. Nothing. Just silence.

In broadcasting language, the communication network went dark. 400 years of darkness.

But more than the lack of communication, those 400 years were dark for other reasons too.

For example, about 150 years prior to the days of Malachi the prophet, Cyrus the king of Persia gave permission for the Jews to return to the Promised Land. In one of the most awesome ironies of all Scripture, God used a pagan king to fulfill one of His most precious promises.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had promised the people He would not leave them scattered in captivity. He would bring them home to the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And that promise was fulfilled in 539 BCE.

- They were now home.
- They had rebuilt the temple.
- They were no longer captives ... at least, technically.
- But they were still under the rule of Persia. They were closer to a colony ... a nation of sorts under the rule of a foreign king.
- When the Persia empire fell, the Greeks took over. And then the Romans. They were never in charge of their own lives again.
- None of that was ideal, BUT THEY WERE HOME!
- EVEN SO it somehow wasn't the same.

Yes, they were still a people, but they were not a real nation. They didn't have a king. They weren't allowed to.

- So in the absence of a king, the religious leaders became the de facto



governmental leaders ... which meant that over time, the religious leaders became more political than they were religious ... more interested in gaining power than in serving God

- So matters of faith lost their fervor. Faith was mostly “going through the motions”
- Oh, there were now synagogues in virtually every village, but they were mostly used as town halls not religious centers. You didn’t go there for Bible studies. You went for the latest gossip.
- The “glory days” of King David and King Solomon were long gone. And they weren’t coming back.
- And that reality felt very dark.

In every possible way, this was a dark time. A very dark time.

Last week I told you a story about a trip my grandson and I took to Ohio Caverns, and about those brief moments when our tour guide turned out the lights so we could experience complete and utter darkness. I told you that image is the story of Advent and Christmas, just as reflected in the words of:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

Now granted, our minute or two of darkness in Ohio Caverns was nothing compared to the 400 years of darkness experienced by the Jews. It’s just a picture to help us relate.

But one day – on one normal day in the life of the Jewish nation – a day some 400 years after Malachi - a small shaft of light broke into all that darkness. It wasn’t a bright, overwhelming beam. It was small. Maybe 6 pounds, 6 ounces, 19 inches long. A baby.

- Oh, not the baby in a manger. That baby came along later.
- This baby had a special role to play to prepare the hearts of the people to receive the baby in a manger.
- You know this baby by the name “John.” HIS NAME IS JOHN. That’s how his dad wrote it on the tablet so everyone would know.
- John. When you tell his story, that is the name you use. That’s the name that Matthew used when he wrote our Gospel text for today.

In those days John the Baptist came ... (Matthew 3:1)

But when Malachi prophesied about this baby’s birth, he used a different name.

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. (Malachi 4:5)

John’s birth narrative is told at the end of Luke chapter 1, but it is foretold in Malachi 4.

So here it is: After 400 years of silence, God started to speak again through the birth of a

baby who would grow up to be known as “John the Baptist.” It was this baby who would one day preach:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. (Matthew 3:1)

After 400 years, God is starting to break into the darkness of the world. It's not a bright light yet. That bright light is Jesus. He is the Light of the World, and He is coming. But John is the first ray of light in the story of Christmas – like the breaking of the day at sunrise. The first shaft of light you see if you are paying attention. That slight change in the sky when you realize a new day is about to start.

Through John God breaks into the darkness with these important reminders:

### **REMINDER #1: DARKNESS DOES NOT MEAN ABANDONMENT**

Just because it's dark, doesn't mean you are alone.

- Just because God is silent doesn't mean He isn't there.

I don't know if you have ever walked through a time in your spiritual journey where it seemed as if God was silent. I have, and it's not a pleasant experience.

- My personal time-of-silence lasted about two years.
- I never doubted that God was there during that time.
- I never believed that He was unaware of me or my situation.
- I was doing all the things I would counsel you to do if you were going through a similar circumstance: keep praying, keeping reading your Bible, stay active in your church, find ways to serve other, repeat the promises of God to yourself.
- Through it all, I knew God was listening.
- But He wasn't talking. And I needed Him to talk!

A Spanish mystic and early church writer known as “St John of the Cross” wrote about this kind of thing, calling it:

The dark night of the soul

In modern times, the phrase “dark night of the soul” has become a popular way to describe a crisis of faith or a difficult, painful period in one's life.

- “Dark” is a good way to describe it.
- It is as if there is this deep dark chasm between you and God, and you and others.
- You feel alone. You may be surrounded by people, but you feel alone.
- You beg and plead for God to speak.
- Imagine 400 years of that!

In a scene from the 2004 film *Ray*, about the life of Ray Charles, Ray flashes back to a time in his childhood, early in his blindness, when he stumbled on his way into the house and called out for his mother. Though she was just a few feet away, she said nothing.

She remained silent. Slowly, Ray picked himself up, listening for cues around him (a teapot's whistle, a passing wagon, a grasshopper) until he found her. "I can hear you too, Mama. I knew you were there all along" he said to her.

- In our own dark nights, though we may not be able to see or hear God, we can be sure that God is there with us all along.
- Darkness is not abandonment. Even though God had been silent for 400 years, He had never abandoned His people.

## **REMINDER #2: DARKNESS ALLOWS US TIME TO PREPARE**

That was at the heart of John's message when he began to preach:

Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. (Matthew 3:3)

Darkness is always a time to prepare for what is next.

Joseph Campbell writes:

"The dark night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed. (Joseph Campbell)

Darkness always comes before the dawning of the new day.

- The Jews ordered their day so that the darkness came first. The day started at 6 pm. So they worshipped to get ready for the day. They slept to get ready for the day.

Everything we do in this season of the year is preparation for a coming day – Christmas. We shop. We decorate. We light candles. We worship. We bake cookies and make fudge – it's all preparation.

When John the Baptist comes with his message to prepare ... it is that first peak of light reminding us to prepare for the new day when Jesus comes.

- For us, that day isn't Christmas, because for us Jesus has already been born.
- For us, that new is Christ's second coming.

One devotional writer expressed this truth in a way I had never heard before – and I really like it. I wish I had said it. She wrote:

What Advent should really prepare for isn't just a day, but a way of life. (Amber Ginter)

She continues:

It might sound a bit odd, but Advent gives us space and time to cultivate deeper spiritual disciplines if we choose to participate in it properly.

- Cultivating these true meanings of the season could look like choosing to sit in silence for five minutes a day or lighting candles at home while we read a Scripture passage. It could be memorizing one verse every week or implementing weekly and intentional slow rhythms. The choice is yours. What matters is that we create space for Christ in our homes, schedules, emotions, and expectations.

In this dark world, in the dark nights of our soul, in the shadows of relationships and schedules, through Advent we are reminded by John to “prepare.” There is a new day dawning. And it will be here soon.

### **APPLICATION**

I have asked you to commit a verse of Scripture to memory to help lock in this year's Advent theme of “Shining Into the Darkness.” Our verse this year is:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Let's repeat it together.

The bright light is coming! Let's not miss the first rays of light that God is beginning to show.

Amen