

“The Opening Act”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom* #1
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 3:1-12)

Preliminary Remarks

Fall is in full swing, and it is a season of new beginnings. And as we start the fall we're also going to begin a new series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. The title we've given to this sermon series is "The King and His Kingdom." Over the course of the school year we'll be working through this great book of the Bible.

Most scholars believe that the Gospel of Matthew was used in the early church for teaching and discipling people about the Christian faith. If you look at it closely, you'll discover that the gospel is divided into five sections that include both a narrative about the life and ministry of Jesus which is then followed by a section of teaching, or discourse, by Jesus. For example, the Sermon on the Mount is the first teaching or discourse section in the gospel, and it represents the First Principles of the Kingdom.

Today we'll begin our study by looking at chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel, and we'll go back and look at chapters 1 and 2 which record the birth of Jesus later on in the year when we get to Advent and Christmas. It makes more sense to cover that material then. So, we're going to jump right into the story of Jesus when He's about to begin His public ministry.

Matthew begins his account of Jesus' ministry by introducing us to an interesting person named John the Baptist. He was a strange and fascinating individual. Let's take a closer look.

Read Scripture and Prayer.

Introduction.

My son Nate is a professional musician, and he's traveled and seen more of the world than I have. (This is a picture of Nate and his son Lleyton.) The first band Nate was in was named Rose Hill Drive, and he formed it with a couple of his buddies in high school. They went on to achieve a great deal of success and notoriety early on in their career. They were written up in *Rolling Stone* magazine, and they opened for big name bands all over the world like Van Halen, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Black Crows, and Arrowsmith. My late wife Lorie got to see Nate and his band open for the rock n roll band The Who before 80,000 people

in Hyde Park in London back in 2006. It was incredible. On the screens, you'll see a picture of a concert there.

One thing was crystal clear for Nate and his bandmates. They weren't the group that was headlining the event. They were the opening act. And the promoters of concerts would caution them about not being so good or so loud that they showed up the headlining band. For this reason, the sound techs would actually keep the volume lowered somewhat whenever Nate and his band played so that when The Who or some other famous band hit the stage after them there was a bump in the volume and the energy and the lighting. You see, being the opening act, they were supposed to simply warm up the crowd, get them ready, and prepare the way for the main attraction. That's sort of like the role John the Baptist played.

It's clear that the ministry of John the Baptizer was remarkably effective, because people flocked to the countryside to listen to him preach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. He is a crucial figure in revelation history, because, in retrospect, his appearance in the wilderness was the most significant event in the life of Israel in more than 400 years. For 400 years, God had been silent and had not spoken through one of His prophets from the end of Malachi's time until the appearance of John the Baptist. Who was this man? What did he say, and what did he do?

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There are several things I want you to notice in our text about John the Baptist and his ministry. **First, notice the place he stayed** – the wilderness. Between the center of Judea and the Dead Sea lies one of the most terrible deserts in the world. In the Old Testament, it is sometimes called *Jeshimmon*, which means “the Devastation.” It's a limestone desert which looks twisted and warped.

The significance of this summons to be baptized in the Jordan River meant that Israel needed to come once more to the wilderness. They had been there before, after their escape from Egypt and crossing the Red Sea. And as before when Israel was called to a time of separation in the wilderness, it was to prepare them for what was to follow and give them an opportunity for a second exodus in anticipation of the New Covenant God would establish with His people through Jesus Christ.

Notice also the clothes he wore – a garment of woven camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. “That's a really happening outfit, John! Very stylish! Where did you get those new clothes?!” There was another person in the Bible who wore the same outfit. Do you recall who he is? Elijah, another great prophet in the history of Israel.

In the Old Testament it was predicted that another prophet like Elijah would come and precede the arrival of the Messiah, and later on in chapter 17 Matthew

tells us that John the Baptist was in fact the fulfillment of this Old Testament prophesy. He was that one like Elijah, wearing the same clothes Elijah did, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. In spite of fashion trends that come and go, John wore the clothing of a prophet, and he made a statement in the clothes he wore. It was quite a retro look!

Next I want you to notice the food he ate – locusts and wild honey. (I don't suspect that if you go to a restaurant after the service today you'll order that!) John's diet emphasized his protest against the selfishness and the self-indulgence of the people of Israel. John wasn't the sort of person you would probably invite to a party. He had strange dietary habits that would present quite a challenge. His whole life was a protest against the spiritual problems in his day, and every aspect of his life, including the food he ate, was intended to reflect a single-minded focus to prepare the way of the Lord.

Finally, notice the message John proclaimed. *“Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand....After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 3:2,11).* John called for repentance and he pointed to the greatness of Christ who was about to come. Here was the most significant prophetic figure in 400 years in the life of the nation of Israel, and he says he's not worthy enough to even untie the sandal of the One who is coming after him.

John also said in his message, *“I baptize you with water (a sign of repentance and turning), but He (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 3:11).* In other words, “You think I'm something? You think this baptism with water for repentance is a big deal? You ain't seen nothing yet!” John was simply the opening act for Jesus, and the main event was about to begin. The volume would be turned up, and the real show was about to start. The Messiah would come with the power of God's Holy Spirit.

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In his book *Ordering Your Private World* author and pastor Gordon MacDonald writes about John the Baptist, and he presents John as an example of a person who is *called* rather than *driven*.¹ Do you know the difference? MacDonald says that John was called by God, and it impacted everything he did and everything he said. He had the audacity to tell his fellow Jews that they ought to quit justifying themselves on the basis of their sense of racial superiority and face up to the fact of their need for spiritual and moral repentance. And John said that baptism would testify to the genuineness of their contrition.

As you study the life of John, you discover a remarkable example of a person who had a clear sense of his own identity and an understanding his place in the world. And it was from this position of clarity that he became a herald who prepared the way for Israel's Messiah. From the very beginning John seems to have had a vivid sense of his destiny which was the result of a heavenly assignment that came from deep within his soul.

When news came that his popularity was on the verge of a serious decline, one gets the impression that the people who brought the news to John that his ratings were falling were hoping for a negative reaction. Instead, John said, "*A person can receive nothing, unless it has been given to him from heaven. I've already told you, 'I'm not the Christ.' But 'I was sent before Him.' I'm just the best man, not the bridegroom. So this joy of mine is made full. He must increase, and I must decrease*" (adapted from John 3). What an amazing perspective John had.

In his book, MacDonald says there are three things that helped John develop this clarity of mind and heart. The **first** is that **he understood** that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God, and **life is to be lived as a steward**. The people who asked John about his declining popularity assumed that the crowds belonged to John and that he had earned his following with his preaching and his charisma. But that wasn't John's perspective at all. He never owned anything, much less the crowds. John knew he was merely a steward managing someone else's treasure. And he knew that the owner was at liberty to take his gifts back whenever he chose and to use them in any way he wanted to. John was a rock star for a time and for a specific purpose, but when that purpose was completed it was time to pass the baton and the limelight over to the main act – Jesus Christ.

What this says to you and me is that our careers, our possessions and assets, our natural and spiritual gifts, our health, and even our families aren't things that you and I own. They belong to God, and we are merely stewards of these gifts. And they are ultimately God's to use as He chooses. That's how a steward thinks. Is that how you think about your life and your resources?

The **second** thing MacDonald says helped John develop clarity is that he knew who he was, and **he had a clear sense of identity**. In John 3 the Baptist said, "I'm not the Christ. I'm just the opening act." People who have great power often have a difficult time giving it up and will often fight as hard as they can to hold onto it for as long as possible. They have a hard time separating what they do from who they are. This explains why retirement is so difficult for many people, and why some mothers suffer depression after their last child leaves home. They confuse what they do with who they are.

John didn't have a problem like this. He wasn't seduced by the applause or the popularity. He knew who he was and what his job was too, and he didn't confuse the two. Don't underestimate the significance of this principle. Today in our

media-saturated world many good and talented leaders face the constant temptation to begin to believe their own press clippings. And if they do, a messianic fantasy gradually infects their personality and leadership style. Forgetting who they are not, they begin to distort who they are.

And the **final** thing MacDonald says gave John his clarity of thinking was **an unwavering understanding of his purpose**. John knew he was the forerunner to Christ. He was the best man at the wedding, not the groom. The purpose of the best man is to simply stand with the groom and make sure that all the attention is riveted upon him and the bride. The best man would be a fool if in the middle of the wedding he suddenly turned to all the guests and began to sing a song and try to be a stand-up comic. The best man fulfills his purpose most admirably when he draws no attention to himself.

And that is what John did. “He must increase, and I must decrease.” So the crowds eventually left John and they followed after Jesus, just like God wanted it to happen. John’s purpose had been fulfilled.

Where did he get this sense of clarity? How did John understand his role so clearly and have so little ego that he could take a back seat and serve. I believe it all began with his parents. It’s clear from Scripture that Zachariah and Elizabeth were godly people with an extraordinary sensitivity to John’s call in life. It had been revealed to them through various angelic visitations, and I’m sure that they in turn from the earliest days began to tell John what God wanted his destiny to be. That must have shaped his soul and his calling before God. Parents, how are you preparing your children to follow Christ and shape their souls so they can fulfill God’s destiny for them?

Conclusion.

I began my sermon talking about my son Nate and his band opening for The Who. No matter who we are, even the most famous person here this morning is only supposed to be an opening act for Jesus. John the Baptist understood this, and he centered his whole life around that fact. He came to prepare the way of the Lord. May you and I do the same in the coming week.

As we close I want you to think about one more things, and it’s this whole idea of preparation. If you’re going to bake a cake, you’ve got to prepare. You’ve got to grease the pan first so the cake doesn’t stick. If you’re going to paint a wall, it’s usually a good idea to prepare the wall by washing it and priming it first. Then you’ve got to prepare by taping all the woodwork and doorknobs.

Whenever the president goes anywhere, there’s an advance team that goes ahead of him to prepare the way. A few years ago, Lorie and I took a ferry in Boston to go to Martha’s Vineyard. Next to our car on the ferry was a big black Suburban with tinted windows, and there were several other Suburbans that looked

just like it. The one next to us had their window rolled down, so I asked the guy sitting in the passenger seat, “FBI?” The guy shook his head “no.” “CIA?” Again he shook his head “no.”

After some prodding he finally told me, “We’re with the advance team preparing for President Obama’s visit to Martha’s Vineyard. We’re the bomb squad.” The guy went on to tell me they had to go to every place the president was going to visit and thoroughly check out every square inch of each venue to make sure there weren’t any bombs there, and they had special equipment to do it.

We’re ready to prepare pans for baking a cake and prepare a wall for paint and prepare Martha’s Vineyard for a presidential visit, but what kind of job do we do to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives and in this world? How well do you prepare your hearts to worship God on Sunday by getting a good night’s sleep on Saturday? Are you preparing your children for a lifetime of following Jesus by making family devotions a priority in your home? Are you preparing for the return of Christ by joining Him in His mission of restoration and reconciliation in trying to tackle the difficult problems and the thorny issues that need to be addressed in our broken society today? How does God want you to prepare the way for Christ?

In a time of spiritual complacency and conformity to the world, John and those who were baptized by him wanted to be different. And they wanted to identify themselves wholeheartedly with the Lord and prepare the way for Him. They chose to take a stand for God and against the popular opinion of the people in their day whose primary pursuit in life was personal peace and affluence. They wanted to make a difference for the Lord; they wanted their lives to count. What about you? Are you making a difference for Jesus in your world? How distinctive is your life in Christ?

¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, pp. 51ff. Several of the points in this sermon were adapted from Gordon’s excellent chapter on the called person.