

Scandal: The Wild Guy
By Jason Huff
December 27, 2014
Deuteronomy 18:17-19; Acts 3:11-12,16-26; Matthew 3:1-12

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from Matthew 3:1-12. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 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. 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. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. 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. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.""

Have you ever thought Christmas was over just to find out it wasn't done yet? I've found a Christmas present I was going to give someone in my closet a week afterwards. Have you ever done that? Maybe you see relatives the next week and open gifts. The church has always celebrated Jesus' birth from roughly the 25th of December to the 7th of January. That's where "The Twelve Days of Christmas" comes from – that's a whole lot of Christmas to celebrate!

It's hard for us to consider today's passage a part of Christmas. But in Matthew's gospel, it comes right after Jesus' birth. Thirty years have passed. Despite the news the shepherds and magi spread, the Messiah hasn't publically appeared. We celebrate Advent, the time of waiting for Christmas, for four weeks. But in history, the wait between Jesus' birth and His ministry was a lot, lot longer. But Matthew ties the two together by saying, "In those days John the Baptist came." He's not worried about the wait. John the Baptist is a herald just like the angels and the star. John the Baptist continues the scandal of Christmas as he proclaims that the wait is nearly over. John is only the spokesman of God, but Jesus' ministry must wait for John to do his job.

From our point of view, everything about Christmas is a little wrong. Jesus has a messy lineage; His birth to a virgin is hard to believe; the shepherds and magi were unlikely people to welcome the messiah. Herod is the wrong king who does the wrong thing to protect his throne. Now we have the guy who is hardly the one we would expect would help people get ready for Jesus' coming.

The Jewish people haven't seen a prophet like this in their lifetimes; in fact, there hasn't been a prophet like John in several hundred years. He looks like Elijah, the greatest prophet in Israel's history. Just like Moses' name was tied to the giving of God's law, Elijah's name was tied to the prophets and their messages from God. When the Israelites saw John, it was like something out of ancient history! Imagine if somebody was wandering around Lakeside Mall in a suit of armor. You'd have the same kind of reaction that the people of Israel had to John.

Everything about John, from his bizarre appearance to his message, speaks of spiritual crisis. John preaches, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." The word *metanoia*, translated "repent" in English, has no exact equivalent in our language. It doesn't mean to feel bad or feel sorry, exactly. It means to "change your mind," to turn around, to be different from how you are now. Sounds good...but why change your mind? What's the point?

The kingdom of heaven is near. Matthew's Jewish audience shied away from saying the name of God, but Matthew is telling them that God's Kingdom is at hand. This is something every young Jew has heard about since childhood, hearing about the day of the LORD...but it's been four hundred years since the last Scriptures were written. It's so far in the past that to hear someone saying the time has finally arrived is bizarre. It's as weird to them as it is for us to hear someone on a soapbox proclaiming that Jesus is coming back soon. Difference is, John knows exactly what he's talking about. Jesus is his cousin, and he knows who Jesus is. John may look crazy and sound crazy, but he is stone-cold serious about preparing the way for Jesus' ministry.

He fulfills his role described in Isaiah's prophecy – out in the desert, he is making Jesus' path straight. He makes Israel aware of its responsibility to God and to His Son. Traditionally, when a king was on the road, a contingent would travel ahead to make certain the ground was level, to get rid of bandits, and make sure the journey was as smooth as possible. Jesus' way wouldn't be easy, but at least many in Israel were prepared for Him through John's work.

The most scandalous thing about John is what he's known for – baptism. We don't think twice about it, even if we don't really understand it. But baptism was not a part of being Jewish. Only pagan converts to Judaism were baptized as a symbolic washing away of their uncleanness as Gentiles. For a Jewish person to undergo this ritual was profound. It meant that merely being born into Judaism and having the right lineage didn't mean you were right with God.

Were the Jewish people chosen by God, given rights by Him, given the sacred Scriptures and blessed by Him? Absolutely. But it didn't mean they were right with Him on a personal level. To receive eternal life, one's heart and mind and life has to be changed and pointed towards God; that change is symbolized by baptism. John's baptism proclaimed that being a Jew alone was not the key to God's Kingdom. Confessing sin and turning to God is the only answer.

John became a nationwide phenomenon. People came from all across the country to see him. The Jewish historian Josephus writes more about John than Jesus! But baptism was controversial. The Pharisees and Sadducees went to see what was up – but not to be baptized. They thought they were right with God. The Sadducees trusted in their long-standing authority in Israel. The Pharisees trusted in their strict set of rules they thought made them holy. They were deeply offended by the idea that they needed baptism like a pagan convert.

But John is offended by them! He goes after them. These are the religious authorities of the day! Imagine Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes and Joyce Meyer and all the televangelists being called a “brood of vipers” and you get the picture of how stunning this was. John tells them, “Don’t rely on your bloodline to save you. Turn your hearts towards God and act like it!”

He warns them that God’s judgment is coming on those who don’t act like they belong to Him. His successor, Jesus, is going to separate out those who truly repent from those who follow their own evil desires. Those who repent will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit so they can become more and more like God. But those who don’t will be like chaff burned up in the fire. John is blunt – you either turn away from your sin or you will be judged for your sin.

John brings new scandals to the mix of Christmas. John prepared the way for Jesus in his own time and place, but what he said and did resonates now even more than the young Jesus being visited by magi and shepherds. John prepares the way for us to meet Jesus even now.

First thing that stuck out to me this week: *appearances aren’t everything*. At first glance, John appears crazy. That’s what the religious teachers thought; later on, they accuse him of being possessed. But his appearance established he was the one in the role of Elijah to announce the Messiah’s arrival, something prophecy had foretold. They didn’t like how Jesus looked, either, though they criticized him because he ate and drank with notorious sinners. To those threatened by John and Jesus, anything about their appearance could be critiqued. They didn’t go deeper and listen to the message because they were too obsessed with appearances.

We know our culture is obsessed with appearances; that’s no surprise. From the Photoshopped covers of magazines to the images that sell us stuff on TV, image is everything. It’s not enough to play a sport well or to sing well or cook well or do whatever God has gifted you to do well; you have to *look* good doing it. But our passage doesn’t really speak to the outside world. It speaks to the insiders’ world, religious people relying on appearances. And that’s something that’s alive and well.

We’ve all gotten used to television preachers, and they look good. They sound good. They pack auditoriums with 20,000 people at a time. And they tell you that you can have the things that make up their appearance – the clothes, the homes, the cars. All you have to do is give to them and do what they tell you to do, and it will happen for you. It doesn’t matter if what they say is in the Bible or not because “appearance is reality.”

But we find it in faithful churches too. Many churches with biblically sound beliefs fall into the trap of appearances. In an attempt to get more folks into churches, worship becomes a production. Thousands of dollars are spent every week trying to impress people with a show. Churches are encouraged to have a “wow factor,” something to convince people to come back.

But appearances are deceiving. The truth is, our “wow factor” is never enough. Somebody is always going to have a better band, a better show, a better preacher, better coffee, better programs. The secular world can do a really good job of making people feel good about themselves. There’s only one thing the true church has that nobody else has, and that’s the good news of Jesus Christ – nothing else.

Appearances fall away. It's the truth that matters. If we present the truth, we won't wow everybody. A lot of folks will find what they want in the lights and sound and everything else. I won't judge them; they may become faithful Christians, and that's what we want. Someday, it would be great if we can expand what we do. We might have a full band if it helps us worship more passionately; we might have small groups if they help us grow closer to Christ. We want to be genuine, kind, compassionate. But those must be in our DNA as a church, not appearances. It is far important that we worship God in spirit and truth rather than just looking like we are.

Second thought – *we need to embrace the full meaning of repentance*. We have a blunted understanding of what it is to repent. The word “repent” has the sense of being sorry for what you've done. That only captures a tiny piece of the big picture. The word from Greek I mentioned before, *metanoia*, according to one dictionary is “to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness.” That's a lot more than feeling sorry.

And Greek has a word for feeling sorry for our actions. It's translated correctly as “remorse.” It's used to describe how Judas felt when he realized that Jesus had been condemned to death. And it didn't do him any good; that remorse led him to his death. We don't need that! Instead, we need full-on *metanoia* – repentance that changes the whole of who we are.

I really struggled with this idea this week. A lot of us struggle with the concept of guilt and feeling bad about the bad things we do. And what I realized, the breakthrough for me, is that real repentance doesn't begin with feeling guilty about sin or being sorry for what we've done. It's being genuinely sorrowful that *we love our sin*. It's true! If we hated sin, we wouldn't do it from the start. We would be convinced that it hurts us, that it's bad for us and bad for our relationship with God. But that's not the way it works. We love our sin.

When I watch a show that's crude because I think it's funny, I watch it because in that moment, I love that laugh more than my relationship with God. When I don't change the channel or the conversation when it glorifies lust or violence or ungodliness, I do it because in that moment, I love that thing more than my own holiness. I might regret it later, but not enough to not do it again later – not unless there's been *metanoia*, a true change of heart and mind.

When *metanoia* is happening, we hate that we love our sin. We confess our sins – not just admitting we've done them, but taking responsibility for them, recognizing that we chose them over God. And we go to God as the only one who can turn our love for sin to hate. He's the only one who can change our minds and hearts so thoroughly that we pursue Him rather than our sins. We turn to Him and ask for that change. And He will give it as we sincerely ask.

Let's not be content with feeling sorry that God doesn't like things that we do. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, the apostle Paul writes, “Godly sorrow brings repentance [*metanoia*] that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” If we turn to God when we recognize the depths of our sin and ask Him to change us, we will. When that happens, we will begin to see the fruits of that change that John the Baptist tells us will come with true *metanoia*.

Last thought this evening: *have your own faith*. I don't mean create your own faith where you take the bits of the Bible you like and throw away the rest. I mean, own your faith. Make it personal. Make it yours. Whether we realize it when we're eight or eighty, we cannot coast on the faith of those who came before us. We have to claim it.

The Pharisees and Sadducees had inherited their faith, but it wasn't a faith in God. It was faith in their status. The Pharisees inherited the law that they thought they could keep and be righteous through that. The Sadducees had been the ruling class for centuries, well connected and powerful even though they denied a lot of the doctrines of Judaism such as the coming messiah and the resurrection of the dead. They inherited systems, but not a trust in God. They had arrogant self-righteousness that since they were the descendants of Abraham, God owed them something. John says that can make a stone into a descendant of Abraham! The promises to Abraham meant nothing if not accompanied by a living faith in Abraham's God.

Some of us here grew up in church. Some of us didn't. All of us have our own story of how we got here tonight. Almost all of us have someone to thank for bringing us to church or inviting us to a service at some point in time. But even in these days when it's becoming less and less respectable in our culture to be a Christ-follower, plenty of churchgoers go every week out of habit rather than faith. They do it to keep the peace in their homes, to get a positive start to their week, or out of respect for their family. It really doesn't matter why we go. It's not showing up that matters. It's not our family's faith that matters. It's our faith.

On the final day, God is not going to ask if your grandparents were Christians or your mom or dad. He's going to either say, "Come into my Kingdom, my son, my daughter," or He will say, "Go away – I never knew you." And that's going to be wholly based on if we believed Him and experienced that beautiful *metanoia* change or if we refused Him and refused to let His Spirit change us. God is so deeply involved in that choice that our will and His will meet in that moment of decision. Yet we must choose. We must believe. We must claim the faith. We must walk with Christ. We cannot live like the religious leaders who thought their ancestry would save them. We live as people saved alone by faith in Christ, faith that comes as God changes our hearts from a love for sin to a love for Him.

As we celebrate the final two weeks of the Christmas season, we find that the scandal of God's grace extends well beyond the birth of His Son. It extends to the cross itself, the scandal that the one perfect being would die for us and the penalty for our sin. Don't let the scandal be for nothing. Embrace God's story; embrace the message of John; change your heart and mind and believe the good news that Jesus Christ has come to save you and give you eternal life.