A Voice in the Wilderness (New Testament Figures)

Repent, because the one we have waited for is coming

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, June 26, 2022
PASSAGES	Luke 3:3-18; Isaiah 40:3-5; Luke 1:13-17; Luke 1:76-79; Matthew 3:1-4; Malachi 4:5-6; John 1:35-41
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:55:56 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Israel had spent the whole Old Testament longing for a true prophet, judge and king, and for God's glory to return. John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way, and he did it by telling people plainly to repent. That confrontation was not a distraction from Jesus; it was God's mercy, making sure his people would not miss their Saviour.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We cannot "nice people into the kingdom." Some of what God uses is direct enough that people take it as confrontation.
- The whole Old Testament leaves us longing: for a prophet like Moses, a true judge, a king like David, a priest who could change the heart, a temple filled with glory.
- John deliberately took up Elijah's clothes and baptised where Israel first crossed the Jordan. The deliverance needed now was not from Egypt or Babylon but from sin.
- John did not say "repent because it will go better for you," but "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The reason is someone else: he is coming.
- Repentance is not just confession; it is turning, and John made it concrete for crowds, tax collectors and soldiers.

- A direct call to repent is an invitation, not a condemnation. If sin is not sinful, Jesus is not merciful – only indifferent.
- We are not defined by our feelings or happiness but by God's image and union with Christ, and we are not left with a baptism of water: there is a baptiser in Spirit and fire.

▶ 0:55:56

Having finished the Old Testament series, Matt began the New Testament with John the Baptiser – the week of John's feast day, he discovered, so "we're on the Spirit's curriculum again." Before him, Lisette had shared from the women's retreat a line she had heard: "Truth without love kills, and love without truth is a lie."

Too milquetoast to have enemies

▶ 0:56:56

Matt recalled that when he introduced the prophets he chose abortion as his example of how divisive a prophet's message could feel – before the news about Roe v. Wade had leaked. The prophets cut people to the heart; Jeremiah wanted to quit. Something about John the Baptist appeals to him in a disorienting world. Growing up in the 1990s, he drank from a cultural cup that said, "I think I can nice people into the kingdom" – the evangelical fantasy where someone asks why you are so happy, you say something fuzzy about Jesus, "and they're like, I'm a Christian now, bada-boom bada-bing."

▶ 0:58:44

John's role almost has no place in that worldview. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm too milquetoast to even have enemies to love." Matt himself used to be pro-choice; what changed him was people willing to talk with him without yelling, until his own argument from the grey area turned on him: "If I can't prove it's a person, I can't prove it's not." Those were moral arguments, not only religious ones – the kind John made to a ruler's face about a woman who was not his wife (Mark 6:17–18). He lost his head. In a culture where everyone has their own truth and "could you say that to my face?" counts as a comeback, John said it to a tetrarch's face.

▶ 1:00:28

The church has a role now, too, when many babies may be born and not all will have homes. Matt called up his wife Mandy, who coordinates Hope's foster and adoption ministry. She prayed that the words of the church's mouth and the meditations of its heart – its offences, judgments and reactions – would be acceptable to God (Psalm 19:14), and that the church would rise up not only to take in children, many of whom already need homes, but in discipleship, evangelism and speaking the truth.

A long story of longing

▶ 1:07:19

To get reoriented, Matt retraced the Old Testament. A blessing for all nations promised to Abraham, glimpsed when the Queen of Sheba came. Moses' promise that God would raise up "a prophet like me… and I will put my words in his mouth" (Deuteronomy 18:15–18). Judges whose deliverance never lasted, as Israel looked more like Canaan rather than the reverse. David, not sinless but no idolater. Joash, faithful only while the priest Jehoiada lived, because a priest could not enter his heart or live forever. A rebuilt temple that waited for glory.

▶ 1:09:55

> "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"
>
> ISAIAH 40:3–5 ↗

God's glory will come, and before it a voice in the wilderness – public, seen by many, and from God.

A miracle baby with a job description

▶ 1:11:03

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous, but Elizabeth was barren and both were old (Luke 1:5–7). Barren, advanced in years – almost a motif before God raises up someone great, flagging a miracle baby but "mostly drawing attention to the might of God that's about to enter into the fray." An angel meets Zechariah in the temple ("every time they show up they have to say, don't be afraid"):

▶ 1:12:13

> "He will be great before the Lord… and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."
>
> LUKE 1:13–17 ↗

▶ 1:13:59

Later Zechariah prays over his son: "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High… to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness" (Luke 1:76–79). Mark that phrase: *the tender mercy of our God*.

Elijah's coat, Israel's river

▶ 1:15:06

When John comes, his message is summed up in one line: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1–3). Not repent because it is advantageous, but because of something greater, longed for for generations.

▶ 1:16:13

Malachi had promised: "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" (Malachi 4:5–6). God does not want to visit his people and have them miss him. And it is God himself who is coming: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Malachi 3:1).

▶ 1:17:18

When King Ahaziah sent messengers to Baal-zebub and a prophet turned them back, the king asked what kind of man he was. "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." "It is Elijah" (2 Kings 1:7–8). So it is no surprise that "John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4). "That's the Elijah costume." John knew his calling and acted it out on purpose.

▶ 1:19:25

The same with where he baptised: "Bethany across the Jordan" (John 1:28), on the east bank where Israel gathered before crossing into the promised land. They had already had the land, the temple, armies and walls. "What we really need is to be delivered, not from Egypt to the country, but from sin." John is not saying God has had it with you; he is saying "our deliverer is almost here. I don't want you to miss it."

Is confronting sin un-Christian?

▶ 1:21:03

Luke quotes Isaiah at more length, ending, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:4–6). The confrontational ministry is salvation-based. We set up false dichotomies – you are either into repentance or into Jesus – but Zechariah said it all flowed from God's tender mercy.

▶ 1:22:12

In our culture, if something is not about me, it is hard to see why I should care. But the logic here is: repent because *he* is coming. Confronting sin is sometimes called un-Christian because it focuses on what people are doing wrong instead of on Christ's mercy. Yet this is exactly what God wanted to prepare the way. Matt wondered aloud whether his own reluctance to confront sin is what Jesus condemned in the leaders who neither entered themselves nor let others in (Matthew 23:13). "Instead of it being a super un-Jesusy distracting thing, it's like a super Jesusy thing."

▶ 1:24:47

> "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees."
>
> LUKE 3:7–9 ↗

▶ 1:26:11

"That's intense, but it's exactly what God wanted said." And when the crowds ask what to do, it gets practical: share your second tunic and your food; tax collectors, collect no more than authorised; soldiers, do not extort, and be content with your wages (Luke 3:10–14). This was a repentance ministry, not just a confession ministry. Confession puts words to it; repentance, from a word meaning literally to turn, is going a different way.

"He who is mightier than I is coming"

▶ 1:27:57

> "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand… So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people."
>
> LUKE 3:15–18 ↗

▶ 1:29:08

"Guys, this is just water. This isn't hocus pocus." Israel had been through the waters before – the Red Sea, the Jordan – and been delivered from Egypt and Babylon, but needed an inner deliverance, the cleansing by the Spirit Ezekiel promised. And Luke calls all this "good news." How do we make sense of that?

▶ 1:29:42

Matt offered three ways. First, an earnest, anointed call to repent "is not technically a condemnation; technically that is an invitation." Second, a call that specific – I'm a tax collector, and he names my exact sin – produces frustration: it sounds so hard. "Almost like everyone who went before you couldn't do it too, huh? … The guy you've been waiting for, he's coming." Third, seeing sin for what it is is very Jesus-like. "If sin isn't sinful and dark, then Jesus isn't merciful; he's indifferent." Jesus said the one forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:47).

▶ 1:32:49

> *"Sin is seen for what it is – a terrorist seeking to destroy you vindictively. It's been our enemy this whole time, not really Egypt, not really Assyria or Babylon, not really Persia or Rome."*

Behold, the Lamb of God

▶ 1:33:26

John's ministry and Jesus' overlapped. Standing with two disciples, John saw Jesus pass and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" They followed him; Jesus asked what they wanted; "Come and you will see." One was Andrew, who went and told his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:35–41). Who told him? John. God let John become "mega famous as a prophet" so that when he said, "There he is," people were ready to listen.

What this means for us

▶ 1:34:36

Our culture struggles to embrace confrontational truth-telling about sin, but it is the very thing we need in order to trust the one who draws us out of it. And we tend to define ourselves by our psychological state – our happiness, feelings and self-perception – as if protecting it were the point of life. Even parents can adopt it: "I want to raise you to be happy… what's going to make you feel fulfilled, honey?" It is frowned upon to place an expectation on anyone. John's whole vibe was not affirming whatever you were doing or feeling.

▶ 1:37:50

"We are not defined by our feelings or our wants or our psychological state at any given moment – which is a relief." Think of that fantasy convert again: what if you are a Christian but not happy today? We are defined by God's image and union with Christ, which comes with imperatives and his right as our King to tell us what he wants. Matt was not begging for a harsh, antagonistic church. "The truly merciful way to go about this is to introduce the only Saviour anyone could ever have – and we ourselves miss him when we ignore or avoid John-the-Baptist-level confrontation."

▶ 1:39:38

If you say, "I'm just about Jesus," remember who prepared his way – the repent man, whom Jesus called the greatest of the prophets (Matthew 11:11). And when Jesus began, he did not say something totally different; that is next week. For now, take hope: "We are not left with a baptism of water. I am not just standing here saying, hey, do better, man." There is a baptiser in Spirit and fire our ancestors longed for, his baptism free because of his death, who delivers not from Babylon or Egypt but from sin and death itself. "What more merciful a ministry could we ask for?"

▶ 1:40:52

Matt prayed that God would help us not to miss him; that where sin is blinding us to Christ and blocking the way, he would till the soil of our hearts and help us repent; and that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on us by his grace and mercy.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Mark 6:17–18
- Psalm 19:14
- Deuteronomy 18:15–18
- Isaiah 40:3–5
- Luke 1:5–7
- Luke 1:13–17
- Luke 1:76–79
- Matthew 3:1–3
- Malachi 4:5–6
- Malachi 3:1
- 2 Kings 1:7–8
- Matthew 3:4
- John 1:28
- Luke 3:4–6
- Matthew 23:13
- Luke 3:7–9
- Luke 3:10–14
- Luke 3:15–18
- Luke 7:47
- John 1:35–41
- Matthew 11:11

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt confessed he once believed he could “nice people into the kingdom.” Where have you held that hope, and what has it cost?
2. John said repent “because the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” not because it will go better for you. How does that change the reason you turn from sin?
3. How can a direct call to repent be an invitation rather than a condemnation? Who has done that for you?
4. In what ways does our culture – and maybe your own heart – define a person by their feelings and happiness? What does it mean to be defined by union with Christ instead?
5. Where is sin blocking your view of Jesus right now, and what would turning – not just confessing – look like this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel’s senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church’s governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope’s own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCmChsMEK1U&t=3356s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.