

Mixed Messages

Mixed messages are like mixed signals only more detailed. The US government subsidizing tobacco growers and advertising against using tobacco is a mixed message. The liturgical church does this with Advent. Some have blue paraments and the 1970's emphasis on hope and some have purple paraments and the historic emphasis on repentance. True; a church can have either and most end up having both, but that mixing of messages is nothing compared to our text.

Our text begs the question: Who is this man? Kind of like Elijah in the OT, John the Baptist shows up with no backstory in Matthew. He comes "preaching in the Desert of Judea." Matthew, Mark, and Luke quote the Isaiah passage telling us John's: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him'" (Mat. 3:3). In John's Gospel, John himself quotes the passage saying this is who I am. And just who is that? He's the Voice that goes before the Lord, i.e. Yahweh but points to the Man, Jesus Son of Mary, saying, "That's Him, Yahweh."

Who is this man who dresses like Elijah and lives in the desert? 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah: "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That is Elijah the Tishbite." Read how Elijah kills 450 prophets of Baal; how God answers his prayers with fire from heaven, and kills 100 soldiers at his command. Read how he raises the dead, parts the Jordan, and goes to heaven in a whirlwind. John is the Elijah who was prophesied to come before Yahweh did. Jesus tells us in Mt. 17:12 that John comes in the Spirit and power of Elijah, yet here we see he is weaker than the lowliest slave. He says he's not fit to carry Jesus' sandals. Jesus is "more powerful"; that means John is "weaker".

John, the forerunner of Yahweh coming in flesh and blood, doesn't preach in the Temple where Yahweh dwells in a cloud in the holy of holies, but in the wilderness. He calls people out of the Promised Land to a wilderness where devils, jackals, and every unclean thing dwells. The OT Elijah is fed by ravens in the wilderness; in a famine, he's fed by a widow's baked bread; fleeing for his life an angel provides food and drink. In the strength of that food he travels 40 days and nights. How about the NT Elijah? His diet? Locusts and wild honey, yum. Jesus gets the mixed messaging going on here. Read Mat. 17:10-13. "The disciples asked Jesus, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished." Then the disciples understood He was talking to them about John the Baptist."

Mixed messages: forerunner of Deity or a weak Elijah was he? And just where does repentance come in? I shared with the Bible Class how when I went to seminary I was confused by the emphasis on John the Baptist in Advent. That was my fault not being able to connect Jesus' first coming to John, but still the muddle has remained. For this text I have 3 more sermon outlines written but never used. And look for yourself. Based on the ministry of John the Baptist where does repentance come in?

Luke 3:3 says John "went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance *for* the forgiveness of sins." This is where Peter gets Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized *for* the forgiveness of your sins." Repentance comes first. It's true; you can't baptize an unrepentant adult. You know that rite we use for confirmation? Well that is the rite first used for the baptism of an adult. An adult must first renounce the devil and all His works and all his ways. But then you get to our text and read: Mat 3:5-6 "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." So repentance accompanies Baptism. Hold on; later in the text John says: "I baptize you with water for repentance" (Mat. 3:11). Repentance follows Baptism, is produced by Baptism.

Messages mixed enough for you yet? This man in the wilderness is the NT Elijah yet unlike the OT is weak as can be. He calls people out of the Promised Land into the desert to see the Lamb of God carrying away the sins of the world. Where does repentance come in relation to Baptism: before, during, after? You know the Confessional Lutheran answer: Yes! Connect Baptism to wanting to be free of sin, actually being set free of your sins, and a new life set free of sin. Baptism's beginning, middle, and end is repentance.

John will focus on baptismal water creating a titanic change in one's life. Roman Catholic Chesterton in his tongue-in-check way expresses the power in baptismal water: He said the rumor wasn't true that it took "the water-power of the West London [river] to turn me into a Christian" (*Autobiography*, 21). Randy Travis has a 2002 song in the same vein: "Pray for the fish.... They won't know what's coming/ When the sin starts rolling off the like's of him." There's an even older song about a notorious sinner being baptized and dead fish floating to the surface around him. So by all means, do connect Baptism with the desire to remove sin, the actual removal of sin, and a changed life after Baptism removes sins.

Who is this man? Just where does repentance come in relation to Baptism? And finally what saves a person? Here we are at where the rubber hits the road: what saves? We can't have mixed messages about that, but as sinners we of course do mix things up. Let's at least begin our New Year clear about this message. From this text you could come away with the understanding, I should say misunderstanding, that repentance saves. This is our view when we think we haven't felt sorry enough, long enough, intense enough to be forgiven. Or you could come away from here thinking your decision to be baptized saves. After all, people by choice went out to John and confessing their sins were baptized. No, as any good Lutheran knows the right answer to what saves is in believing, right? Salvation by Faith means my believing in Jesus causes God to forgive me.

After Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita was fast approaching less than a month later. An Army Lieutenant General was sent in to organize the preparations for Rita but a reporter wanted to talk about government failings connected to Katrina. The Lt. Gen. told him, "Don't get stuck on stupid." Well don't get stuck on repentance. Repentance doesn't cause God to forgive, move God to forgive, enable God to forgive. Your repenting doesn't keep one of God's laws or pay for your breaking one either. And you choosing Jesus doesn't either. Look at the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John. The insert translates that they were "coming to where John was baptizing." That's about how half translate it. The other half translate that they were coming *for* baptism or *to be* baptized. Great choice? God's prophet John didn't think so: He called them a brood of vipers! No different than stone cold rocks. So salvation can't be a matter of choosing.

Okay, then what saves must be believing. Not so fast. 'Believing' doesn't cause God to forgive. Come back next week. See how the greatest man born among women fared in his believing. Remember the man who said he believed but still had unbelief? Remember even after the resurrection the same apostles believed yet doubted? You can follow Journey's advice not to "stop believing" till the cows come home and that won't cause God in Christ to save you. Thinking your believing can save you is no deeper than Little Engine that Could theology of "I think I can" going to "I know I can." It's no deeper than Disney's mantra: You've got to believe in yourself.

John points not to you, not to your repentance, your decision, or even your faith but John points to Jesus as the answer. Jesus won the right to pour the Holy Spirit on flesh and blood. He had been given the Holy Spirit in His Baptism and He kept Him by living a holy life. The Spirit never had cause to depart from Him. Then He paid on the cross to be able to pour Him out on mankind. Look at Pentecost. After the pain and death of Calvary, after the dust settles from the empty tomb, He pours out the Spirit as a refreshing wind and flame of fire that ignites belief, boldness, salvation in the words and lives of the disciples. John points to Jesus not to us; to Jesus what He did and suffered; to Jesus who has the ability and right to separate His wheat from the chaff and can save the one and burn the other.

Don't make the mistake of church leaders. They thought by mimicking the actions of faith, of followers, by getting baptized they could be saved. Nope. The Lord knows them that are His. And His Holy Word is living and active and able to pierce to the point of separating what we can't: sheep from goats, weeds from wheat, them that are His from them that aren't. But if rocks, inanimate, dumb, unthinking rocks can be made God's children, any of us can be. But don't look inside at the rock hard bottom of your heart look outside to the One who had His heart pierced in order to give us new one's. The message of John is that the Word of God, and the Water of God, are what prepare the way for Yahweh. These make straight paths through error. These level mountains of sin and raise up the depths of guilt so the Savior can reach sinners like us.

One thing made clear in our text is John was named "the Baptist" by the Spirit. The Spirit has Matthew write "John the Baptist." The Spirit Himself says Jesus' forerunner is all about baptizing, applying water in God's name. A secular textbook from the '70s says 2 things about water in ancient times. The first Greek philosopher, Thales, said water was the only substance that persisted through all changes, and both Near Eastern and Greek mythology imagined water as the first principle of all things" (*Western Experience*, 57). We can take away from our Advent text this message: just as Creation began with separating matter from water so recreation starts with God separating sinners from their sins by Water applied in His name. Water is a surviving 1st principle for us: In Tertullian's words, "We are born in water, nor otherwise are we safe than by remaining in it" (*Catacombs*, 90). Amen

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