

“Down is Up”

Matthew 3:1-17

Intro:

This morning we begin on the book of Matthew, starting with the ministry of John the Baptist in chapter three. We'll be concentrating on this book for the school year, so I want to set the stage with some words about the book and about Matthew the writer. We start with the start of Jesus' public appearance, and we'll return to story of his birth in the Advent season.

Matthew was one of Jesus' twelve closest followers. He was a tax collector, a profession everybody looked down on in first-century Palestine, because tax collectors collaborated with the Romans. Jesus called Matthew to be his disciple, his follower or apprentice, and Matthew wrote this book to tell about the difference Jesus makes in life.

The book is called a “gospel,” a word that's from an Old English translation of the Greek “euangelion,” or “good news.” The book is composed of 28 brief chapters, and you can read the whole book in an hour.

Now, each of the gospels about Jesus has a particular emphasis. John focuses on Jesus as the Son of God and the Second person of the Trinity, the one who brings eternal life. Luke shows Jesus as the compassionate Savior of people. Mark shows Jesus as the Son of God and servant, a man of action.

Matthew wanted to show how Jesus fulfilled what the Old Testament was looking forward to, that he was the Jewish Messiah and King. He emphasizes Old Testament quotations, and the fact that Jesus comes from the family tree of David. He probably wrote this book around 60 A.D. from Palestine or Antioch, and he might have based it on the outline of the Gospel of Mark, including his own interpretations of their experiences at Jesus' side.

He focuses on the themes of Jesus' messiah-ship, his kingdom, his teachings, and his resurrection. You could also say the gospel has an opening and a closing, and then it's organized around five great sermons of Jesus:

- The Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7
- The Sermon on Mission in chapter 10
- The Sermon on the Kingdom in chapter 13
- The Sermon on Forgiveness in chapter 18
- The Sermon on the Future in chapters 24-25

In Old Testament times, God spoke through his prophets to tell his people what he was going to do. To Amos he said,

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing
without revealing his plan
to his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

Israel's last prophet was Malachi. He promised God would send a prophet to fulfill the role of Elijah—that means speak God's word—to prepare for the coming Messiah (Malachi 4:5). But after Malachi's ministry closed, Israel had waited over 400 years for God to speak again through his prophets.

That's what John came to do: to get Israel ready for the biggest moment in history, the coming of Jesus to save the world. John burst onto the scene with the theme "Turn from your sins!" After all, that was the only appropriate response to the coming kingdom.

The camel hair cloak and belt around John's waist weren't just random. 2 Kings says that's what Elijah wore, and passed onto Elisha when he ordained him into the prophetic ministry. It was a sign of prophetic authority, that he spoke God's word, that he was set apart from the world. And now John comes, speaking God's word, wearing the hairy mantle of the prophet.

What an impression that would have made! Matthew tells us that people from Jerusalem and all over Judea and the Jordan Valley went out to the wilderness to hear him preach. Jesus referred to John's baptism, and his opponents were afraid to say publically that John didn't have God's authority because they thought the people might riot. Jesus said John was more than a prophet, the greatest of all who had lived until then, and the man the Scriptures were talking about when they said,

Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way before you (Malachi 3:1; cf. Matthew 11:10).

Years later, when the preachers Priscilla and Aquila went to Ephesus in Asia Minor, even there they ran into disciples of John. He had a widespread and lasting influence in the first-century world.

So what exactly did John come to announce? What did God have to say to the people through him?

First, John's saying, "Here comes God!" (verses 1-4)

John's words and lifestyle both call us to turn and follow God. John's a radical servant of God and his choices challenge everyone who claims to trust in God. I mean, wearing camel's hides and eating what you find in the desert!

If you wanted to hear him preach, you had to head away from the city, out into the desert. The desert is where God led his people out of Egypt in a great exodus. It seems like John's enacting a new exodus, a new journey out of Egypt with Jesus. That's what God promised through the prophets to again do one day for his people:

Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.

There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt. (Hosea 2:14-15)

In other words, it would be a new exodus, a great and final time of salvation, and it made sense that one day God would send a prophet to prepare the way. Look at the words Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one calling:
"In the desert prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the wilderness
a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

Do you see who Isaiah is getting ready for? It's the coming of the LORD, which is Yahweh, the Old Testament name God gives for himself. This is the coming of God, himself, the Ancient of Days, the Holy One of Israel. It's Immanuel, "God with us," that the angel promised in chapter 1 (Matthew 1:23). What a claim he's making for Jesus!

It's a call to all true prophets to turn away from the temptations of society. It's a call for everyone who went out to hear John to turn away from evil. It's a call for Matthew's readers, maybe a generation down the road from these events, facing persecution for following Jesus, to know a day of reckoning is coming. It's a call for us in comfortable, compromised, corrupt 21st century America, to reconcile estranged people and take care of the poor.

So, John's saying, "Here he comes! Here comes God to judge and to save his people!" His way of living says "I'm not concerned about my needs, but just about following God in radical discipleship." God's calling, and John says, "Listen!"

Second, John says repent! (verses 5-10)

Repenting just means to turn away from something, to change your mind, and therefore your actions. But John's not simply saying to ask forgiveness after you do something wrong. He's saying, turn away from an old life of sin once and for all; make a radical

decision and don't turn back. He has several dimensions of that call to turn away from sin.

He means for us to turn once-for all away from the old way of life to the new. And the new way of life is all about Jesus, because he's the one John comes to announce, God in the middle of us. Jews would've expected a prophet telling pagan Gentiles to repent. The challenge here is that Israel has to convert, too.

So, John uses the image of fruit. Jesus used this image later in the Sermon on the Mount and in John 15, when he says his true disciples produce much fruit (John 15:8). Sometimes we act like results in the spiritual life don't matter a lot, as long as you're sincere. But the Bible says God wants to see faith that's real and brings about changed lives, and the Old Testament uses the image of cutting down and burning trees that don't bear fruit, and it's a picture for coming judgment. In Jeremiah,

The LORD called you a thriving olive tree
with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm
he will set it on fire,
and its branches will be broken. (Jeremiah 11:16)

John says, in fact, God can raise up children for Abraham out of stones. The people would have remembered Old Testament passages that talked about stones to represent the people of Israel (Ex 24:4; 28:9-12; Josh 4:20-21). That is, don't take your status as God's people for granted.

Do you want to be a part of what God's doing to save the world? You have to personally trust Jesus as your Savior, and to have a life that shows it. It's not enough to be a part of ethnic Israel. It's not enough to be a member of the church or Presbyterian or evangelical or anything else.

Your life has to match your words, John's saying. It's not enough to say you're an ethnic Jew. And it's not enough for us to say, "Sure, I believe." He's saying, "Show it!"

Third, John warns us about coming judgment (3:10-12)

He says, repent, *because* the kingdom is coming. It's right at hand, breaking into the here and now, the "up there" coming down here. God doesn't ignore injustice in the world, and is going to put things right. If you believe him, you need to get your act together.

John's saying, wicked people are going to be burned just like farmers burn useless chaff after the harvest. When they tossed grain in the air, the wind would separate lighter chaff from the grain. About the only thing you could use chaff for was fuel.

The coming judge is powerful, and he will make things right. All the prophets called themselves the servants of God. But the Coming Judge is so powerful and awesome, that John says he's not even worthy of being called his slave. Only he is God, and only he can pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit. John says, "Understand that, and take it seriously."

So John wants us to hear God's call. He wants us to repent. And he warns us about coming judgment. John's message is all about the law, about measuring up to the demands of our holy God. The problem with the law is it points out the problem, but it doesn't have any power to perform what it commands. And then, Jesus appears, and he's all about a grace that helps us actually do what the law demands.

Matthew wants us to see how God honors the humility of Jesus.

Matthew's public introduction of Jesus simply reads,

Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John (John 3:13)

That's a remarkable line. After all the great claims for Christ, Matthew simply announces quietly, and Jesus appears. It shows his humility. After all, the people need to turn from their sins, but Jesus doesn't. After all, the voice from heaven approves of him as the sinless one.

After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. and a voice from heaven said, "this is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him." (Matthew 3:16-17)

Jesus didn't need the baptism because God was already pleased with him apart from repentance, and because he is the one who gives true baptism in the Holy Spirit.

So why did Jesus submit to a baptism he didn't personally need? We could say it was his commissioning into ministry, because it was how he completely identified with us sinful human beings. And at the baptism, God honors the humility of his Son. God publically honors Jesus as the one John said would be "greater than I" (3:11).

That means Jesus is the ultimate baptizer. It's why John says he's the one who will baptize with the Holy spirit and with fire.

And he's a sign of the new age, the coming kingdom that John announced. He's not just a prophet, but he's the subject of the prophets' announcements. He's the subject of the Father's announcement:

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3:17)

This fulfills the promise of Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son." That psalm was first used as a song to enthrone the king in Israel, and here it becomes a psalm of Jesus' coronation as Messiah. It echoes the promise of Isaiah,

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him
and he will bring justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

John's ministry is to prepare us for the coming of Jesus.

John's baptism is about law, judgment, and the serious demands of God.

John's ministry is about turning from our sins.

Jesus' baptism is about grace, and because he's humble, and he identifies with us poor sinners, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Jesus is so close to the Father, that no one can please the father if they reject the Son.

Jesus is the way to peace with God and justice on the earth.