

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Supreme Importance of Christ**

Luke 3:1-18

This past week we remembered former President George H. W. Bush, and honored his life, leadership, and legacy. When his coffin arrived at the Capitol, one of those waiting was John Sununu. In the early 1990s, the fiery Sununu was Bush's White House chief of staff. During a press conference at that time, a reporter asked Sununu if his job was difficult. He quickly answered, "No." The reporter thought Sununu had misunderstood the question, so he asked it again, and got the same reply. Sununu, who was a former governor of New Hampshire, went on to explain why he thought his job was easy. He said, "I have only one constituent." He knew his job was to please the President.

I don't know who served as chief of staff for Tiberius Caesar, but I'm guessing that he probably felt the same way about his primary accountability. His job was to please the Roman emperor. As chief of staff, he was certainly an important person. But he wasn't the most important person. That role belonged to the first person mentioned in the opening of this morning's Scripture passage.

After narrating Jesus' birth and a couple of scenes from his childhood, Luke moves to the public ministry of John the Baptist. Luke begins this part of his Gospel with a list of political and religious VIPs. These are the "who's who" in government and among the clergy. Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and so on down the rankings. By telling us who was in office, Luke helps us locate the action of God within time and history. In other words, this is the when of John the Baptist's ministry.

Then Luke tells us, very briefly, the where of John's ministry. He received his prophetic call in the wilderness, and began preaching and baptizing in the region around the Jordan River. That's where we encounter more detail about the what of John's ministry. He called the people to repentance and to an act of washing that expressed their repentance and their spiritual cleansing.

This wasn't a first century version of organizing a congregation, with John as the church planter. No, this was something much greater. It was God's way of getting his people ready for his coming. Tiberius may be in the palace. Pilate may be in the governor's mansion. Herod and his brothers may be in their castles. And Annas and Caiaphas may be in their fancy parsonage. But their claims to authority, while important, aren't ultimate. The world's true Lord, who calls all rulers to account, is on his way, to set things right in his creation. So return to God, and prepare for his arrival.

If the style and tone of John the Baptist, God's spokesperson, is any indication, making your life ready for the reign of God won't be a smooth and pain free process. John opens his sermon with this question: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?" (v. 7, NLT). As others have noted, when was the last time you saw that kind of greeting on a Christmas card? Doesn't John realize that this is the season for spreading cheer rather than stoking fear? How does he expect to connect with his hearers and get results by accusing them of being like snakes scurrying from a spreading fire?<sup>1</sup>

But remember that John isn't here just to light a holiday candle. He's here to point to the one who will baptize with a blaze, a heavenly conflagration that purifies the repentant and brings the unrepentant to an end. Yes, the Lord comes in sovereign love, but that love is a holy love that judges our sins and generates new living. It's no wonder, then, that people start responding to John's altar call with questions about their lifestyle and behavior. Notice that these aren't questions that revolve primarily around theological theory. Those who come forward don't ask, "What should I think?" Or, "What should I reflect on?" Or, "What should I affirm?" No, they ask, "What should I do?" What reforms do I need to make in my attitudes and actions? What kinds of changes need to happen in my way of living so that I'm more aligned with the reign of God?

Specific questions deserve specific answers. So John takes account of each person's background and context, and shows them what bearing the fruit of repentance should look like in their particular situation. First, John looks at the whole congregation and says, "If you have more than you need, in terms of food and clothing, you need to scale down and share with others." Then, to the people who work for the revenue department, he says, "Don't calculate people's taxes based on your greed, hoping to pad your pockets with a little extra. That's theft." Then, to those who are in the military, he says, "No more using your power to take advantage of the people under your occupation. Enough with the shakedowns and intimidation."

And what about you? In view of the coming of Christ, and his promise to come again, what does reorienting your life to God mean for your own heart and habits? Are there special temptations that are part of your context and your situation in life, making you more prone to certain sins and injustices? Are there certain things about who you are, where you are, and what you do in life, that you can use to more faithfully love your neighbor and take greater responsibility for others? What would it look like for you to bear the fruit of repentance and to live more fully under the authority and dominion of Christ?

There's something about John the Baptist's message and style of life that cuts through a lot of the holiday chaos and clutter, calling us back to the core issues of being right with God and with our neighbor. Many people are already thinking along these lines at this time of the year, hoping to rediscover what truly matters in life. One way to get at that is through questions. And questions certainly abound right now. How many shopping days do I have left? Where are we having the family gathering for Christmas? What day will Santa be riding through our neighborhood on top of the fire truck? What time is the holiday concert at the school? Should we go with an artificial tree or a real tree? Which part will I have in the children's program at church? While these kinds of questions have their place, they tend to leave us fragmented and frazzled, rather than whole and focused.

Henri Nouwen once wrote:

I often think: "A life is like a day; it goes by so fast. If I am so careless with my days, how can I be careful with my life?" I know that somehow I have not fully come to believe that urgent things can wait while I attend to what is truly important. It finally boils down to a question of deep and strong conviction. Once I am truly convinced that preparing the heart is more important than preparing the Christmas tree, I will be a lot less frustrated at the end of a day.<sup>2</sup>

Preparing our hearts and attending to what is most important. That's part of why John the Baptist often shows up this time of the year in a congregation's life and worship. As I've indicated, at first, his tone doesn't sound like it fits well with the mood of the season. In fact, his lack of cheer seems more in keeping with Ebenezer Scrooge, who said, "I don't make merry myself at Christmas. . . ." From all we can tell, neither does John. But in reality, John is actually a contradiction to Ebenezer. Scrooge said, "I don't make merry

myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry." He was referring to the poor and needy. Imagine if John the Baptist were one of those spirits who showed up to visit Ebenezer Scrooge. That would have made for an interesting encounter.

One person has even challenged us to imagine Charles Dickens as a prophetic kind of figure. She writes, "In the nineteenth century after Christ, when Victoria was queen of Britain, a word of inspiration came to Charles Dickens, son of John, in the wilderness of London. He went into all the region around the Thames, proclaiming the story of a baptism of repentance for a man named Ebenezer Scrooge."<sup>3</sup> True, she acknowledges, Dickens isn't John the Baptist, but he does tell us a story that concludes with Scrooge displaying the fruit of repentance. Earlier, Dickens described Scrooge this way: Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!" But by the end, Scrooge has gone from being hard-hearted and self-absorbed to being filled with joy and generosity. He's a changed man, sharing his wealth and resources with everyone.

Ebenezer Scrooge may not have stepped into the waters of the Jordan, but he certainly knew what it was like to be encountered by a word from beyond. A word that caused him to search inwardly and act outwardly. A word that called forth his own words in the form of the question, "What should I do?" The way that you yourself answer that question and "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8) reveals what you regard as most important in life, not only right now, but year round.

According to today's text, what is most important is inseparable from who is most important. As I said earlier, Luke begins our passage by reminding us of the people who were important, internationally, regionally, and locally. These were the movers and shakers. But God himself was also on the move. And when it came time for him to speak, his word didn't show up in the halls of the palace or under the spires of the cathedral. Instead, the word of God arrived out in the wilderness, along the edge of a muddy and murky river, in the form of a not so merry messenger named John.

John was an important person. There's no doubt about that. But his importance came from his role vis-à-vis the one who was supremely important. You see, John knew something that his hearers were still struggling to get a handle on, namely, that he was just there to get them ready for someone else who would soon be there. Someone whose arrival would make John's arrival make sense. Someone whose authority to fix what's wrong with the world, and with each of us, far exceeded the authority of all those who held office, whatever their place in the hierarchy of power.

One of the reasons we need to hear John preach the good news again this time of the year is because he helps us take the one who's supremely important, Jesus Christ, and keep him supremely important, in our hearts and in our lives. And how supremely important Jesus is to us will be either confirmed or contradicted by whether we bear the fruit of repentance. Saint Augustine, one of the greatest figures in church history, said, "Christ is not valued at all, unless he is valued above all." So in response to Christ's coming, and his promise to come again, let us value him above all. And may his value and importance to us be revealed by how our lives answer the question, "What should I do?"

<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock uses this image in his commentary, *Luke*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen in the *New Oxford Review* (November 1986). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Subrosa09, at her lectionary blog, Under the Rose. December 9, 2012. Accessed December 6, 2018 <<https://subrosa09.wordpress.com/2012/12/08/advent-week-2-a-baptism-of-repentance-for-ebenezer-scrooge/>>.