

The Holiness of God and Our Troubled Times

Scriptures

Isa 42:1-9

Ps 89:20-29

Acts 10:34-38

Mark 1:7-11

Opening

When you think of him, you think of his strangeness: desert man, dressed in camel's hair, diet of locusts and honey. He's the fiery prophet and desert eccentric to us—John the Baptist. But if you want to understand man beyond the surface of things, you have to ask a question about the man we southerners are prone to ask: who's the boy's daddy? And the answer is Zechariah, a priest of the Temple. /

So often one's destiny is revealed in one's origins, and so it was with John the Baptist. Zechariah was one among many priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. Like platoons within a company, there were 24 divisions of priests at the Temple. Each division went to the front line in their turn, the front line being the awesome Holy Place where God tabernacled with his people.

Every morning and evening priests burned incense to worship the Holy One of Israel. Zechariah belonged to Abijah's division. Within their division, priests would draw straws (lots) to see who would burn incense on a given day.

The custom was one day of service and then done—for a lifetime. If your lot was chosen, it literally was a once in a lifetime opportunity. A priest couldn't return to the Holy Place again. Zechariah's lot was chosen and so he entered the Holy Place to serve at the altar of God.¹

He approached the altar of incense, positioned in front of the veil to the Holy of Holies. Zechariah literally burned holy smoke in the altar of incense. It was that cloud of smoke that represented the appearing of God on Mount Sinai, his holy presence burning the whole mountain in smoke, though not consumed.²

That was the day and the moment the angel Gabriel appeared to John's daddy, Zechariah.

To understand his destiny, you must understand John's origins and his origin begins in the Holy Place. Gabriel announced John's name in the Holy Place. And his name revealed his destiny: John is God's servant to turn many of Israel's children to the Lord their God. Gabriel told Zechariah that his son, John, would turn Israel to her God who dwelled in thick clouds, who is awesome and holy and glorious. That's the beginning of John's story.

John in the Wilderness

And that we must remember when John appears in the wilderness, preaching repentance and baptizing Israel's sons and daughters. He's turning Israel in these acts of repentance to the Holy God, incorruptible and seated on the throne of heaven. St Mark says John preached a simple message about the Holy One, "After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."³

¹Marshall, I. Howard. "Luke." Pages 978–1020 in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. Edited by D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994.

²Webber, Robert. *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*. Vol. 1. 1st ed. The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Star Song Pub. Group, 1993, 89.

³Mark 1.7

Maybe that was a familiar saying in John's time, "the strap of the sandal." It was common that Jewish servants would do nearly every task their master asked of them. But untying their sandals and taking off their shoes was a bridge too far.⁴ That was a task even Jewish servants refused to do to keep their own dignity. Yet John the Baptist foretold the coming of a Man who bore the greatest dignity of any human being—the God-Man. In the presence of such holiness, John felt he could not debase himself low enough. He felt deserving of a status even lower than a slave.

His Greatness Was His Smallness

There is an ancient saying of John the Baptist: "his greatness was his smallness." When Temple leaders asked him who he was, John didn't want attention on himself. He said, "I am a voice." Look for the one coming *after* me. I'm just a friend of the bridegroom. John said of the Lord Jesus, "He must increase and I must decrease." I like what one writer said of John. He is like 'the finger of God, (always) pointing to Christ.'⁵ John was always directing us to the Holy One of God. His greatness was his smallness.

Then one day when he's preaching and baptizing, John comes face to face with the Holy One of God, the only begotten Son of God who was with God and *is* God in the Holy of Holies. Now he stands on the banks of the River Jordan.

What need does the Holy One of Israel have to be baptized? Why does the Son of Man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary without the stain of sin, descend into the river?

Well, here we behold a great mystery. And the great mysteries of our faith mean there is more than a single meaning to a holy event. Yet here is what I would have us see about Jesus' baptism this morning. ***When John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, Jesus sanctifies the***

⁴Farley, Lawrence R. *The Gospel of Mark: The Suffering Servant*. The Orthodox Bible Study Companion. Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2004.

water so that water can now transform a body destined for death into a body destined to become a holy temple of the Holy Spirit.

That is the will of God. That we become holy again. So that we can be a holy temple offering God Most Holy our spiritual and bodily worship. /

Gabriel announced John's destiny behind the temple veil in Jerusalem, and when John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan a different veil—the heavens—began moving. Notice how Mark describes the scene. He does not say the heavens separated. He says, "the heavens (were) **torn open**".

Seven weeks ago on the first Sunday of Advent, we read the desperate prayer of Isaiah, "O that you would rend the heavens and come down!"

Well here is the answer to Isaiah's prayer. God tore the heavens open when his only begotten Son of God went down and rose from the River Jordan. God the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus in the form of the dove. God the Father spoke from heaven his unending affection and joy over his Son. What the world had never seen before appeared when Jesus rose from the water—the unity, majesty, and glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We were made to stand in awe of the Lord's holiness and beauty.

The Awesome and Glorious Appearing of God in Three Persons

For the next several months we will devote considerable attention to themes of holiness and reverence. I have sensed for some time that God is calling our parish to grow in holiness. The baptism of our Lord Jesus is an ideal beginning in this call to reverence. This is not to say we have a deficiency of reverence for God; it is to say that we, who are baptized by the triune God, are called to full maturity in the worship and fear of the Lord. /

The Scriptures say "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." I desire growth in reverence because I desire us to grow in wisdom. You may have noticed that the wisdom of

God has become increasingly important in our times. Rare is the soul seeking true wisdom in our time.

So I believe this virtue of holiness is appointed for us “for such a time as this.” It has been a tumultuous week in our country. I’ll say more about this week’s events in a moment. First I want to briefly outline three qualities of holiness essential for these days:

Beauty

The first qualities of holiness is the beauty of God. We need to encounter the glory and beauty of God. Here’s why: we’re surrounded by so much ugliness. In a world of ugliness, our hearts are starved for the beauty and holiness of God.

If your eyes are constantly watching the world’s ugliness, your soul will become cynical and prone to despair.

The despair of the world becomes our *meditation*. That is very different than being informed of events in the world. It is one thing to be aware of the news, it is another thing to have an addiction to news, to constantly meditate on current events in thoughts and conversation.

The wise soul has a much different desire in a world of ugliness. We hear that desire in Psalm 27:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, **to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in his temple.** ⁶

One thing is necessary: to look upon the beauty and mystery of God in Three Persons and meditate, ponder, wonder, and stand in awe in his Presence.

⁶Psalm 27.4

Oh, there will moments in this world that jolt and jar you. But insight and consolation doesn't come through insight, analysis, or hot takes. No, the psalmist knows what it means to be shaken wickedness all around. He's jarred and jolted in Psalm 73, unable to comprehend why evil increases all around him. And then the psalmist finds his bearings and he's no longer alarmed. Only one thing changed for him.

“When I thought how to understand (these things), it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.”⁷

When you come into the holy sanctuary of God, you are no longer wearied by the desire to understand all things. You see the glory of God and you know that God still reigns over the flood and he will make all things well.

Humility

The second attribute of holiness is humility. Reverence requires humility. “He must be increase and I must decrease.” “I am not worthy to unite the strap of his sandal.” John's greatness was his smallness. His smallness was his holiness.

In the Bible, small is often beautiful, small is often holy. Throughout Scripture the Lord loves to exalts the humble in heart. The Virgin Mother praised the Lord that she had been exalted to bear the Son of God. John the Baptist wanted to debase himself lower than the least household servant. And consider the attitude of the Man who entered the River Jordan. Jesus lowers himself below John the Baptist, who didn't want to touch the Lord's shoe string. And when the Lord humbled himself to receive a baptism he did not need, we beheld the glory of God in Three Persons.

Compare that with the spirit of our age, especially in America. We are so self-assured, so sure that we are right. The widespread sin of our nation that is being laid bare right now is

⁷Psalm 73.16-17

our pride and hubris. And here's what St James says about the proud in heart: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."⁸

In baptism our hubris dies and we are clothed with humility and holiness.

Humility is essential for holiness. The humble do not come to into the Lord's presence trusting in themselves or their own righteousness. But when the humble approach the Lord, here is what they find: the awesome, never-ending mercy of God.

I read an ancient Jewish proverb this week that captures this mystery so well. The proverb says: "as is his majesty, so his mercy."⁹ (Repeat). It's so good, let's say that together.

When you come with the fear of the Lord, you find no stern God who is displeased with you. You find the majesty of his mercy. God looks upon you with tenderness, gentleness, and the strength of his love. When you humble yourself, you discover his unending affection. "You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased." The fear of the Lord is a paradox. The fear of the Lord becomes strength to comprehend "the breadth and height and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Wholeness

The final quality of holiness is simply this: *wholeness*. God is not fragmented. We worship one God in Three Persons. My favorite definition of glory is this: the sum of all God's attributes. That's why his glory overwhelms us. We cannot take in his power, his goodness, his love, his mercy, his purity, his justice.

Yet in our age, we are given false choices. We measure virtue by single issues not by wholeness. Are you committed to justice or committed to worship? Are you committed to evangelism or serving the poor? God is not more concerned about justice than personal

⁸James 4.6

⁹Ecclesiasticus 2.18

holiness. He does not favorably on us if we pray often yet disregard the poor among us. God's holiness is his wholeness.

If we worship and serve God in the beauty of holiness, then we cannot oppose one attribute of God against another. We cannot make our own Jesus. We are baptized into Christ, not Christ baptized into our ideas or our agenda. We are not baptized in our name, but in the most holy Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This morning, with joy we (will) baptize(d) Ben Crouch into Kingdom of God and the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. When Ben comes out of the water, he will be/is sealed as Christ's own forever with the sign of the cross. He was adopted by God to be a son of God. And as such he hears the affection of the Father spoken over him, just as he spoke over his only begotten Son: "You are my son, in you I am well-pleased."

And we, the Church, say to him, "Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in the royal priesthood of all his people."

Adopted by Christ, welcomed by his Church. Commissioned with a message of cross and resurrection. There's the whole Gospel for one adopted by the holy God.

A Nation Longing for Mercy

And yet here's the pull that comes to all sons and daughters baptized in God's holiness and adopted by God. To find identity and belonging elsewhere. And in our time, to find identity and belonging specifically in political and social movements.

I believe that Christians can faithfully participate in our political process and social movements, but it looks very, very different for us. May God always raise up humble servants to serve in this republic and bring reforms that delight the heart of God. But may they always have a vision of the wholeness of God's holiness. That's what's sorely missing from our political discourse and our personal conversations regarding our nation's turmoil of the past few years.

In the past few years, we see lines drawn regarding singular social causes, singular political issues, and political candidates. Are you in or are you out? Where's your allegiance?

Do you see what's happening in our culture? We've measuring trustworthiness and character in one another based on political convictions. As if a vote or a single issue defines us.

We live in an era of political tribalism where the pressure is so strong to declare and show your allegiance for a cause or party. There's tremendous pressure to speak in public a specific political message as gospel. You're often shamed if you don't. And here's the thing with tribal mentality in our time—you make enemies quickly and you find your identity in what you oppose. /

This week we have seen the damage and violence caused by political tribalism. Many gathered in Washington to speak their convictions in a peaceful manner. Yet we have seen how the Enemy of God uses extreme political convictions to bring about real evil, violence in the halls of government, and the death of 5 people made in the image of God. //

Baptism means we renounce the deadly deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil. St Paul lived in a time of strong factions in his culture, too, even within the church. He said a resounding **"no"** to the claims of the tribes of his day because he was crucified and raised with Christ.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ"

Oh that we would recover the humility of St Paul and St John the Baptist; that we would give our total allegiance alone to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that the foremost political

message of any Christian baptized into the Church would be: “Confess the faith of Christ and proclaim his resurrection.”

Then my brothers and sisters, we can be a royal priesthood—a holy priesthood—in these days of trial and turmoil in this land that we love.

Our hope cannot be in the “temple of democracy” as I have heard members of congress, both on the right and the left, say this week. Our hope is in the God who made heaven and earth, who radiates holiness and glory beyond compare. Our hope can only be found in the temple not made with hands—Jesus Christ—who was born, baptized, was crucified, died, buried, and raised on the third day so that we become holy as he is holy with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.