

***Living In Expectation:
Repent!***

Matthew 3:1-17

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They were scrambling. Oh, yes they were! The phone just rang. Mom and dad were on their way, a few hours ahead of the scheduled arrival time to pick the boys up from their student apartment and take them home for the holidays. But the party was just last night. And went a little later than expected. And, well, the phone ringing woke them up.

If mom saw the place looking like this.....!!!

Have you ever been in that crisis situation? Maybe it was your wife coming home from a trip and you were left scrambling to do four days of crusted on dishes before she walked through the door?

And for those of you wonderfully pious few that have never been caught short like that because everything is always neat and in order.....

(note - **NO** envy in my voice!)

...I'd like you to imagine that when you get home from church the phone rings. And imagine that it is a representative from Rideau Hall on the line. Her excellency the Governor General would like to pay a New Year's Day visit to your house. Part of her plan to connect with the citizenry of the land. And there would be a telecast interview conducted from your living room.

Imagine that.

What would you change?

Would you redecorate? Paint? Get those dings in the wall plastered? Get that last bit of baseboard, which you've been really meaning to install for three years, finally nailed on? Replace that worn sofa? At very least, make sure the driveway and front walk was shovelled and de-iced?

What would you do between now and New Year's Day?

Note this - you really **don't** have the option of saying "No" to Madame Jean. She is coming. Ready or not the motorcade is pulling up at your door in 10 days. She **IS** coming.

The question is - will you be ready?

So that you can happily welcome her across the threshold.

Will you be ready?

John burst on the scene in Judea.

In a no-nonsense, poke-you-in-the-eye sort of way, he demanded that the people get ready.

Because royalty was coming.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (v.2)

The word "repent" is one that means "turn around; make a lasting change in behaviour."

Make whatever changes need to be made because royalty from heaven is coming.

Get that.

John doesn't call the people to make the changes, to repent

SO THAT

the kingdom of heaven can come near.

They are to repent

BECAUSE

the kingdom of heaven **HAS** come near.

It **IS** come.

Question is - will they be ready?

Truth be told the people were kind of expecting someone like John to come along. They'd been waiting for it for quite a while. There hadn't been a real prophet for about 400 years. Malachi 4.5 speaks of the coming of Elijah "before great and terrible day of the Lord comes."

Now here comes John. He deliberately dresses himself in Elijah's clothing. And the people get it. Here's the new Elijah.

Big crowds show up to hear what he has to say.

And what he says is rather crude. He's not very nice about it.

One film maker depicts it in this way, which I think, other than the English accent, is probably rather close to reality.....

[show video clip]

It's a poke-you-in-the-eye kind of message, isn't it!

Which is sometimes what we need.

We can get all nice and genteel about our spirituality.

Don't want to offend anyone.

Don't want to be offended.

We can use nice, accepting language about, well, pretty much anything.

But to do so may well miss the point.

"If God really is God, he isn't simply the kindly, indulgent, easy-going parent we sometimes imagine."
[T.Wright *Matthew*]

Are you ready for his coming?

The lead group to be poked in the eye by Elijah-John's rough message is the religious group.

First are the serious ones: the Separatists or "Pharisaim"

We might call them - *Laymen United For A Biblical Confession*

Second are the clergy: the Sadducees.

We might call them - *Clergy United For A Relevant Ministry*

John blazes at them with what has come to be known as the "fire sermon."

Three times, in just a few words, he uses that word.

Why fire? Because it has two uses: purifying and destroying.

The fiery heat of a blast furnace draws the iron out of the ore, and sends the slag off into a heap behind the furnace.

The fire of an incinerator destroys garbage, leaving only a small pile of ash.

God the King comes to purify those that are his.

He comes to destroy those that resist his kingship; those that treat his kingly claims as being of no consequence.

Who might that be?

Who are in danger of the fire?

Notice who John blasts in verse 9 – All those who feel spiritually confident because they're part of what seems to be the "right" spiritual pedigree.

You say - "We are from this or that heritage - *insert Abraham or Christian Reformed or Catholic or whatever you want.*"

God says - "So what? I could make a whole family of Abraham's grandchildren; I could make a whole church full of Christian Reformed folk out of the rocks at the Greely Sand and Gravel quarry."

Don't talk to me about your heritage or church membership.
 Verse 8: Show me fruit worthy of repentance.
 Show me your Monday to Saturday activity.

Ignore this message at your own peril.
 The axe is at the root of your tree, says Prophet John.
 Bear fruit, or get cut down. The king is coming. Judgement is at hand.

I count it a real privilege to have grown up within a Reformed heritage of Christianity. It has been a wonderful thing to be part of the faith community of Calvin Church in 2008. Yet I am not permitted to hold these up before God when I appear before him and say, "See?"

I am stripped of all this, says Elijah-John: of all my education, of all my professional titles, of all my religious affiliations.

I am left totally naked, fully exposed before God.
 "Show me the fruit of your life" he demands.

St.Luke also tells of John's fire sermon in chapter 3.
 He shares some parts that Matthew and Mark leave out.
 What's a fruitful life? Says Luke:

- Sharing the extra you have with those that have none.
- Ensuring honest business practices.
- Not being greedy.

No surprises there, really.

It's all essential stuff that Scripture calls for. Stuff of 10 Commandment living calling us to not steal, to value the lives of others. Or Romans 12, with its call to humility, to peace-making, to caring for the poor. Or Colossians 3's call to sexual purity, to kindness, to forgiveness.

All to be lived in our personal lives, and somehow structured into the very warp and woof of our nation.

Beyond just the nice words we speak.
 Actually showing up in what we do.

Friends - If Jesus returned at noon today, would there be fruit in your life?
 Think about it carefully, because the answer **DOES** matter.

Never mind the Governor General.

If Jesus calls you to appear before him, will you be ready?

Ho hum is inadequate.
 Status quo will not do!

Are you ready?

[pause]

Now tell me -

How does John's Fire sermon leave you feeling?
 Are you like me, finding the whole thing rather intimidating?

Because, you see, I'm not fully confident about the fruit of my life.
 I try.

I really do try to acknowledge that the money in my bank account is not, first of all, my money, but God's. So I try to spend wisely, and share generously.

I really do try to engage the political process of our nation, to be an active participant on behalf of God.

I really do try to bring greater purity to my speech, to honour my wife, to see other people as valuable image bearers of God.

But I'm not really sure.

I'm not so confident that it is good enough for the Royal King of Heaven.

Actually....

....truth be told....

.... I **AM** sure.

Even though I try, and will continue to try,
it is **NOT** enough.

My life **always** will be a "work in progress."
A project still under construction.

And so -

for me the part **AFTER** John's fire sermon is every bit as important as the sermon itself.

And that is the part about Jesus coming to be baptised.

For there I see the Son of the King coming as a human being and identifying fully with my impure and still-under-construction life.

Because that is what his baptism signified.

The people came into the river to be washed and signify a new start.
Jesus gets right down into the water with them.

"I'm here with you,

with the you that needs washing,

with the you that needs a new beginning,

with the part of you that **NOBODY** should see because it is so scandalous,

with the regret that you can't shake off."

I'm here with you.

John knows how backwards this looks.

He - the fire preacher - knows that he, too, is impure.

HE needs to be baptised.

Not the pure, perfect Jesus.

Yet it must be so.

Why?

"To fulfill all righteousness." - verse 15

The only way that John, or any of the crowd around him, or you, or me, will ever be fully declared righteous is through Jesus.

Is through being taken under the saving power of the Jesus who comes to earth to be human and to identify with us, and live the perfect life in our place -
- the life we could never live.

John doesn't get all that.
Which is how things go with prophecy.
Generally speaking the prophet doesn't get to see the full picture.
She or he gets one glimpse, one angle of the truth.

We said that last week when looking at Mark 13. Don't go to that chapter expecting that you'll be able to fully map out the timeline of Christ's return. You'll just get totally frustrated.
Same here in Matthew 3.
And, guess what?

In Matthew 11 John **does** get totally frustrated. The preacher of the fire sermon sees the pure and perfect Jesus living a humble life, associating with people who haven't got it all right yet and who are still showing busted up corners to their lives. And he can't figure it out. He doesn't see the axe or the fire. And he sends representatives to Jesus to ask, "Are you **really** the Messiah?"
Jesus has to reassure him that, yes, he is.

So hear John's prophetic fire sermon in the right way, as part of the picture.
Your life does matter.
Your actions are important.
They are important because they demonstrate the real truth of any commitment you make to the king whom you claim to serve.

Words are cheap.
Actions are real.
Get ready!!

That's John's prophetic contribution.

What he couldn't fully see was that our actions, by themselves, won't gain us standing before Heaven's King.

That only comes by a total - word and deed - surrender to the One who went into the Jordan to be baptised.
To the God-Man Jesus.

John couldn't see that Jesus had come to enter the mess of our lives.

And that he stays here with us.

"Surely, I am with you always, to the end of the age" he promised at the end of Matthew's gospel.

John didn't hear those words.

But we did!

We have the blessed privilege of the full Gospel, not just one prophetic corner.
And so, we don't have to be intimidated by the challenge of a life of faith action.

We can confidently move towards it.

Trusting that, for Jesus' sake, we will one day hear God's voice of affirmation.

Yes, like John we are not be worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus. Not in and of ourselves, we're not.

However, through the miracle of God's grace and Christ's accomplished work on the cross - which John didn't see - we are granted the grace gift of that worth.

Even more! We are raised to an even greater worth.

We are raised to be as Christ to those around us!

In our lives of service to the Saviour.

And, as we go about those tasks, we by grace hear the same voice that Jesus heard at the river, God's voice of affirmation.

"You are my beloved children, with whom I am well pleased."