

THE MISSION LAUNCHED

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

Around the end of January each year, the President of the United States delivers the State of the Union Address, in which he gives a report of the status of the nation and a prescription for how to go forward.

We're going to be looking at a passage of Scripture in which a unique and interesting individual by the name of John the Baptist gave his own "state of the union" message. It wasn't very well received. It was a challenging message that eventually led to his death at the hands of Herod, toward whom he was a constant antagonist.

John the Baptist is one of those characters in Scripture about whom we know only a little bit. He bursts onto the scene with a public ministry for just a short time. We're going to talk about the man, his message, and his mission. I hope his "state of the union" message for the nation of Israel in his day will challenge us to consider the state of who we are as the people of God.

The voice in the desert

We've been studying the opening chapters of the gospel of Luke in this series. As Luke has unfolded his story for us, he's been using the character of John the Baptist to set up the story of Jesus. An angel foretold the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah, and then an angel foretold the birth of Jesus to his mother Mary. John the Baptist was born, and then Jesus was born. Luke has interwoven the lives of these two men, leading up to the story we'll look at now, in which John the Baptist will introduce to the world Jesus and his ministry. After this story, very little is said about John the Baptist. Luke 3:1-6:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in,

every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,

the rough ways smooth.

And all mankind will see God's salvation.”

We're also told in the other gospels that John the Baptist was living out in the desert, preaching in the areas around the Jordan River (Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:1-5; John 1:28).

Notice that Luke has grounded this account in historical data, as he does at key points in his gospel. He has supplied a full range of details to root this story in the real history of Palestine as he describes how God was actively working through his people. This is not just some fanciful yarn.

John is identified as the son of Zechariah. As we saw earlier (Discovery Paper 5221), his birth was predicted beforehand, and it was a miracle birth; his father and mother were beyond their childbearing years and Elizabeth had been barren her whole life. In John God gave a special gift to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and he gave to the nation a prophet who would speak the word of the Lord to them.

Luke says, “The word of God came to John.” This was the first time those words had been said about an individual in four hundred years. Previously there had been a long history of prophesying by which God continued to speak to his people, but then there was a four-hundred-year prophetic silence in which there is no record that the word of the Lord came to anybody.

John lived in the wilderness, and he dressed and ate strangely (Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6). He was a bit of a recluse who didn't walk in the main societal corridors of the nation. If we had such a man in our society, we'd probably want to have him committed. People then also probably thought he was strange. But he said passionate, fiery things about God. And it was to this man, specially raised up by God, that the word of God came.

The preparation

What was John's message? We're told he preached a baptism of repentance. There were other baptisms in the history of Judaism. Proselytes (Gentiles who converted to Judaism) were baptized. There were some other ritual washings. But it seems best to understand the baptism of John as a special one. He called people from the nation of Israel to turn from their sins and go through a ceremonial washing, a baptism, to testify publicly that they were turning back to their calling. In fact, in Acts 19 Luke records that in the expansion of the church, Paul came across people who had received this baptism but had not yet fully heard the message of Jesus. So John's impact was felt in the society as he called people back to righteous living before God.

Let's look at Luke's recording of this "state of the union" sermon John gives. Luke 3:7-14:

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

“Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

“Don't collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

Now, most speech classes would teach you not to start the way John does. “You brood of vipers!” doesn’t immediately endear you to your audience. But John wasn’t worried about that. There’s great liberty in not caring what people think, and John was one of those interesting characters who did not care what anybody else thought. He only cared to do what God wanted him to do. He wasn’t intimidated by the possibility that people would be angry with him, or worried about what they would do. He just spoke the word of the Lord. Eventually it would cost him his life, but he never wavered.

This message of repentance is one that challenges the Jews to return to their calling as a nation. He starts out saying, “Who warned you?” In other words, “What brings you out here to hear me?” Many of the people probably came out because it was a bit of a novelty that there was a strange character preaching out in the wilderness. They wanted to go see what was up. Others might have been genuinely interested in finding out if he was a true prophet who had a word from the Lord. As we’ll see in a moment, it was a time when people were anticipating God would do something dramatic, and maybe this was it. But John knew that their hearts were not really seeking after God’s truth, at least not yet, so he challenged them.

Then, knowing how their minds worked, he challenged them further: “Don’t even begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” In other words, “You’ve been claiming that you’re righteous and acceptable to God simply because you possess Torah and you’re Jews, God’s chosen people.” It was the reflex action of the Jewish people to do that, and all of these things were part of their history. But John says, “Don’t even go

there. It's not your heritage, it's your heart that matters." So he warns them from the beginning that judgment is coming, that repentance should bear fruit in their lives, that the ax is already poised, that the good trees are going to be separated from the bad, and those that are not worthy are going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

This message cuts them to the quick, so they cry out to him, "What shall we do about this?" Different groups of people ask, "What about us—what should we do?" In each case he brings them back to their calling as the people of God, which is to have God's presence among them and bring light to the world, to demonstrate that there is a different way to live, a way that is not about selfishness but is for the glory of God and for the good of others. It is to live as a community of people who care about one another, who demonstrate grace and righteousness. It is to stop being like everybody else. So he says to different groups, "Don't take more money than you're supposed to...If you've got two tunics, help the person who doesn't have one." He's calling them to shine forth the holiness and greatness of God to the world around them, to be what they were created to be: a light to the world. The essence of their sin was missing the calling and being just like everyone else, but John says, "Repent of that, turn back to your calling as the nation."

Luke emphasizes a number of times in his gospel that salvation was coming to all the world. When he quotes Isaiah about a voice calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord," he adds a line from Isaiah that none of the other gospel writers do: "And all mankind will see God's salvation." For it was the calling of Israel to not simply hoard the

truth of God but to shine it forth to all people. Luke, a Gentile himself, was a disciple under the tutelage of the apostle Paul, who took the gospel beyond the borders of Palestine and saw it begin to spread to the ends of the earth. As I've said before, Luke cared particularly about this because he himself was a recipient of that call to become part of the worldwide family of God.

The coming of the Lord

Let's look now at John's mission. Luke 3:15-18:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

John's message was beginning to hit home with some people, and their hearts had already been expecting God to do something dramatic. "Perhaps Messiah will be coming." So

they asked him, “Are you the Messiah?” This was a critical moment in John’s life. Here was a great opportunity to seize the day, to say, “Well, now that you mention it, I would make a good Messiah,” to wield more influence and power, to leave the wilderness for a place with perhaps a greater following. You and I would have been tempted just like that. “Now that people are beginning to hear my voice, maybe they’ll start thinking that I’m something, and maybe then I ought to step forward and get a little bit more recognition.” But John never goes there. He says, “No way. Let me tell you about the One who is coming after me.” John’s mission was to point people toward Jesus, the coming Messiah. He was raised up from the womb for that mission, specially commissioned by God to prepare the way for the Messiah.

He says three important things about this One who will come after him. First, he is far more powerful than John is. “He is so much more powerful and mighty than me, I’m not worthy to untie his sandals.” The untying of sandals was considered such a menial job that they didn’t even ask their servants to do it.

Second, he says, “I have a baptism of repentance, calling you back to righteousness, but his baptism is superior to mine. It’s a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” There has been much debate about what John is referring to here. Some have suggested there were two different baptisms associated with Jesus, but it’s probably best to understand him as pointing to Jesus as a figure who will cause men and women to decide. He will place us in relationship with him in one of two ways. If we respond to him, the baptism of the Spirit comes, and the Spirit dwells in us as followers of Jesus. It’s a wonderful gift to

be in that vital connection with the living God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Fire, though, is often a metaphor for judgment in Scripture. Based on what he says next, the baptism with fire probably points to the fact that those who will not accept this man as the Messiah will experience judgment. The point that John is making is this: “If you think my message is calling you for a decision, wait till you meet Jesus. He will compellingly call you to trust him as the Messiah, to follow him and experience an incredible baptism of the Spirit like nothing you’ve ever imagined—connectivity and power and fellowship and intimacy with God himself. But should you choose to reject that, your other choice is the fire of judgment.”

The third thing John says about the One who will come after him is that he himself will be the Judge. Verse 17 says, “His winnowing fork is in his hand....” The winnowing fork is a large, wooden farm implement. They would sweep it through the wheat and cast the heads into the air. The heavier, good kernels of grain would fall back to the ground almost exactly where they were cut, and the lighter, worthless chaff would be blown away in the wind. The good grain would be gathered into the barn and the chaff would be burned in the fire. Once again the picture is of dividing good and bad. John is saying there are going to be two kinds of people in the world: those who will respond to the gracious outpouring of the Spirit and the gift of new life through this Messiah, and those who will reject that. And the Messiah himself will be the Judge who makes that division. So as John points to Jesus, the One who will come after him, he introduces him as the Messiah, the fulfillment of all that they have been looking for, but also as one who will ultimately ask them to decide, to trust or to turn away.

Public confirmation by God

In the midst of this scene, while John was baptizing people, Jesus walked up and asked to be baptized. John had been pointing to the One who was greater than he, and here he was asking John to baptize him. In Matthew's gospel, which gives a bit more detail about the baptism than Luke does, we're told that John says to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" And Jesus says, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:14-15.) This was a step in God's program. And so Jesus was baptized.

Luke's description of Jesus' baptism is found in verses 21-22.

**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:
"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**

After his baptism, as Jesus was praying, the heavens opened up and the Spirit of God alighted on him in the form of a dove. We've used the dove as a symbol for the Holy Spirit because of this passage. It doesn't say he *was* a dove, it says he descended from heaven in a form that looked like a dove. Luke is wont to give all the detail he can to

describe a scene, and he talks about the Spirit's being "in bodily form," meaning he was visible. John the Baptist himself will testify that he saw this (John 1:32-34). We don't know how many others in the crowd saw it, but it was a visible manifestation of the anointing of God on the life of Jesus, marking him out as God's called Messiah. In this dramatic form his public ministry was inaugurated.

On top of that, God's voice spoke out from heaven and said to him, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The things God says about Jesus are important. "My Son," "the beloved," and "the one with whom I am well pleased" are all titles in the Old Testament. There has been much debate as to which passages these titles are from, but most scholars believe that they are messianic passages. The phrase "my Son" probably comes from Psalm 2:7. That psalm extols the virtues and the coming of God's Messiah King. This title identifies to all who will hear that Jesus is he. The phrase "whom I love" may be rooted in Isaiah 41:8. The word in that verse is "chosen," but some scholars see an allusion to that in the words "whom I love." The phrase "with you I am well pleased" is probably rooted in Isaiah 42:1. These latter passages are in a part of Scripture that talks about Israel's vocation as the servant of the Lord. In this prophetic announcement about Jesus by God himself, he is saying publicly that Jesus is now the fulfillment of the nation's calling to bring light and salvation to all peoples, that Jesus is the Servant who will bring salvation. As the Messiah comes, he becomes the fulfillment of all of Israel's calling. God is now acting decisively to bring his salvation to the world.

In so doing, he answers the question of why Jesus was baptized. For John's baptism was done for people to repent from sin, and Jesus lived a sinless life, so why would he be baptized? In this act of obedience Jesus was validating John's ministry, and he was identifying himself with the sin of the nation and its need to repent, and also with the vocation of Israel to bring salvation and light to the world.

What does all this mean to you and me? First, Jesus is the true Savior and Judge of the world, announced to be so by God himself. His public inauguration into ministry in this scene begins to proclaim who he is. This will be unfolding through his life, his death, his resurrection, and beyond.

Second, we are called to follow him and live as the people of God. Jesus took up the vocation of Israel and gave himself to be the way of salvation; as followers of Jesus, we too take up that vocation to be lights to the world, to demonstrate the beautiful grace of God, to show that there is a different way to live than for ourselves: to live for the glory of God and for the good of each other.

Finally, now our baptism is our profession of faith in him and our identification with the people of God and their mission. For as I have said before, when we come to faith in Christ it is an individual decision, but it is not just so we get to go to heaven. When we come to faith in Christ, we are saved *into* something—the body of Christ, the community of faith, the people of God. Baptism is not only a public declaration of our personal faith

in Christ but is also our public identification with the people of God. We are now part of the community of faith, living out the mission of the community of faith.

This wonderful story of the inauguration of Jesus' ministry based on the preparatory work of John the Baptist in calling the nation back to righteousness, stands as a wonderful picture of who we are to be as followers of Jesus: part of the people of God, who are willing to proclaim his glory from the rooftops, to live out their vocation.

I invite you to spend a moment or two in prayer, and think about who you are in relationship to God. Perhaps you have slid away from that vocation, and you need to hear the message of John the Baptist to repent and turn back to being someone who exemplifies God's grace and righteousness. God's forgiveness is there for you, and there is restoration power in the Spirit to lead you on to live a life that brings glory to Christ. Or perhaps you have never placed your faith in Christ, and now you have heard this wonderful call to be free from your sins and to be part of the people of God. The invitation to you today is to repent, trust Christ for forgiveness of your sins, and enter into the family of God, the body of Christ.

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Luke 3:1-22

Seventh Message

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