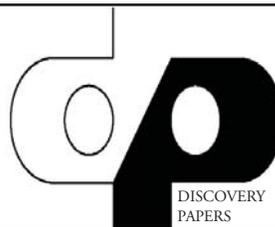




PREPARE FOR THE KING



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John 1:18-34
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Paul Taylor
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Are you ready?

Think about how many different contexts you have heard that question asked. You might have heard it this morning as you were showering and getting dressed. Maybe it was asked with some annoyance, “Are you ready?”

Maybe you heard this question after nine long months of waiting. The doctor finally asks this question and tells you to push.

Maybe you’ve heard this question from your insurance agency, asking if you are fully prepared for some kind of a disaster that might strike you or your family.

Maybe you’ve asked this question to an older relative or friend whose time in this life has grown short.

We spend so much of our lives getting ready. It can sometimes seem like one of our main activities is to prepare. So how do we get ready? How do we prepare for what’s really important? How do we even know what we should be preparing for?

This morning we are continuing our new ten month series looking at the gospel of John that we’re calling *Signs of Life*. John’s approach in telling the story of Jesus is to give us signs that emphasize one simple idea: Jesus is the source of life. If you want to really live, then you need to get to know Jesus.

So that’s what we are trying to do. For the last two weeks, we looked at what is usually called the prologue of John. It’s a grand, cosmic, philosophical introduction to the person of Jesus. Those two weeks were marked by the image of “the Word.”

Now we start to get into the story itself. As we start into the story, we are grouping these stories under the image of *BIRTH*. We’ll see that image get a lot of attention when we get to a conversation that Jesus has with a Jew named Nicodemus in a few weeks. But this whole section is marked by something beginning. It feels like the birth of Jesus’s story.

After the grand and cosmic nature of John’s prologue, now things are a little more down-to-earth. Instead of hearing about creation and light and darkness, we hear about people walking around and talking to each other. And the first person we hear about is a particular person

who is tasked with getting people ready.

Today is the story of John the Baptist. Keep in mind that this is a different person from the John who wrote this gospel—sometimes that can be confusing. As we talked about last week, John the Baptist had one singular goal in life. His goal was to prepare people to receive Jesus. He helped people get ready for the most important thing in the world—the reception of the King. So this morning we’ll be thinking about what it looks like to prepare for the King.

The story we’re looking at this morning is from John 1:19-34. It describes an interrogation of John the Baptist by powerful people in the first century culture. Throughout the conversation, you get a sense of this growing hostility until the dramatic conclusion when that hostility reaches a climax.

This conversation is not unlike the conversation we might have in our world. Plenty of people in our world are hostile to those who would prepare them for Jesus. People are tired of trite answers and bumper stickers and Jesus gimmicks. They don’t really want to know more about Jesus. So how do we tell them? Watching John prepare people who don’t necessarily want to be prepared will help us think that through.

But this might even be a good question for some of us. Because when we are honest, some of us in this room are hostile to the message of Jesus. We may be really involved in this church, but are tired and feel unappreciated. We may be having questions about our faith and Jesus doesn’t seem as real as he once did. We might be going through some hard stuff and are angry with God. Even Christians can be hostile toward Jesus.

So perhaps the efforts and the words of John the Baptist that are designed to make us ready for Jesus can help us. Perhaps they can help us be ready to receive him. Perhaps they can be a model for us to help others become ready. In either case, they point to Jesus. They prepare us for the King.

Deny False Kings

Our passage begins with messengers being sent to question John the Baptist. The period in which John preached was a time of great unrest. Israel had been occupied by Roman forces for nearly a century. The

Jews had been promised that their God would give them freedom and they were getting impatient waiting for it. As time went on, there was this growing expectation that some sort of Messiah would rise up and lead God's people in war against their enemies.

So when John the Baptist came on the scene, people started wondering. He was different. He was eccentric. He went off to the wilderness. He started initiating people into some new movement. And people were responding. They were coming to him from all over. He was incredibly popular.

And so, the powerful people in Jerusalem sent some scouts to find out what was going on. We'll start by simply reading the first two verses.

John 1:19-20:

¹⁹And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

John the Baptist was a big deal. He was what people want out of a spiritual leader. His birth was remarkable. His father went mute for the duration of the pregnancy and then gave him a name ordained by God instead of one from family tradition. He left a cozy life in his village and moved out to the wilderness. He ate locusts and honey. He stood up to the powers that be. His words were deep and mysterious. Everything about him was extreme.

He was the kind of guy that people follow. Today, he probably wouldn't have a Facebook page and a Twitter account because he'd be living off the grid. But his fans would have dozens of references to him. Today, he'd be famous because he would be the only person around not trying to be famous.

In Luke 7:28, Jesus had this to say about John, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John." When we get to Acts 19, we hear about the apostle Paul arriving in Ephesus and finding disciples of John the Baptist there. It seems as if they hadn't realized that John was connected to Jesus. That's how great the fame and following of John the Baptist had spread.

Stop for a moment and think about our world. Think about the kinds of people that draw attention and develop followings. Most of them are entertainers or sports figures. But sometimes there is a leader who inspires people. Who gives people hope that things could be different. Every now and then, someone comes along who makes you think that things could actually change. They could get better.

John the Baptist was like that. Like Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Mother Theresa or Lao Tzu. He was a great and popular spiritual leader.

So when representatives from Jerusalem came to him to ask him, "Who are you?" it was clear what they were asking. It's like a reporter causally asking Hillary Clinton what her plans are for the fall of 2016. These messengers wanted to know if he was the one.

This was a big moment for John the Baptist. This could have been the beginning of something big for him.

He knew that. He knew what was at stake. That is exactly why he made the effort to make it clear that he was not the person they were looking for. The ESV Bible does a great job of translating the awkward but emphatic repetition of the Greek here, "he confessed and did not deny, but confessed." And then he gives a simple and clear explanation. They just asked him who he was, but he tells them right off the bat, "I am not the Christ."

Just like most of the things John the Baptist says, these words resonate with meaning. You might recall that when Moses asked God to tell him his name, his reply was "I AM." Ever since that time, the phrase "I AM" had special significance in Jewish thought. It was the name that you couldn't say without claiming to own it. So Jews refused to even speak it.

In the Greek language, there is a certain way of saying those words that specifically emphasize all of this. "They remind us of God's name in the Old Testament. The Greek phrase is "ego eimi."

John, the author of this gospel, is particularly fond of those words. He uses them 24 times in his gospel. He records seven sayings of Jesus using them. Jesus says "I am the vine," also the gate, the good shepherd, and others. The most dramatic reference is recorded in John 8:58, when Jesus stands before a hostile crowd and says, "Before Abraham was, I AM." Immediately the crowd picked up stones to kill him because those words made him out to be God.

So when these messengers come to ask John the Baptist who he is, he says, "I am not the Christ." But he says it using those words. He says, "ego ouk eimi." I am not. There are other ways he could have said the same thing in Greek, but he chooses these particular words. I am not. I am not the Christ.

By using those words, he makes it abundantly clear that he isn't the Christ. But his answer also suggests that no one like him could be the Christ. The Christ is in a completely different category. John says "ego ouk eimi." He seems to

be suggesting that the only one who is the Christ is the one who has the right to say “ego eimi.” I AM. The one who is the Christ is in a completely different category from me.

And so John the Baptist starts his preparation not by focusing on the people who need to be prepared, or even on Christ himself. He is preparing people for a King to come, but he starts by making it clear who isn't that king. And who can't possibly be that king. His first step in preparing us for the King is to deny false kings.

Our culture is so confused about who Jesus is. The most common view of Jesus outside of Christian circles is that he was a great leader with a lot of powerful stuff to say. A lot of people think of Jesus as if he were what John the Baptist was. A spiritual leader. Maybe even inspired. Maybe even sent from God. Maybe even the best spiritual teacher to ever walk the earth.

But John the Baptist's first step in preparing the world for Christ is to make it clear what kind of king we are expecting and what kind of king won't suffice. John the Baptist was the best that flesh and blood had to offer. He had it all. But it wasn't enough. Not only wasn't he the King, but he couldn't have been the king.

What does our world need? Our country is considering a military strike on Syria. Our nation's political atmosphere is divisive and bitter. The economic disparity in our country is disturbing. Within a few miles from here, there are multiple families living in a one-bedroom apartment and a house next door on sale for 3.5 million dollars.

What do we need? What do you need? A spiritual leader like John the Baptist? A political leader who will do what you think needs to be done? A corporate leader like Steve Jobs?

None of this will suffice. That's the point of John's answer, “ego ouk eimi.” Nothing that the world has to offer will solve these problems.

The world needs a different kind of king. The world needs someone in his own category. The world needs someone who was in the beginning. Someone who was with God. Someone who is God. The world needs someone who can say, “I AM.” This is the Messiah that the Gospel of John describes.

So for us as we hear these words of John the Baptist we are challenged by them. Challenged because most of us in this room know that we need Jesus, but we so often settle for less. We so often settle for what we think will change things enough to make us happy.

John prepares us to receive Jesus by reminding us that

we need something bigger than anything this world has to offer.

We, in turn, take part in the preparation of others by refusing to settle for less than what the world really needs. We can't talk as if our political candidate will save the day. We can't talk as if this new job will finally give me what I'm looking for in life. We can't talk as if I would be ultimately happy if my wife would just do this or that. We can't talk like a little more money in my pocket would finally be enough.

We can't think that way. And we can't talk that way. Along with John the Baptist, preparing for Jesus in our lives and the lives of others starts by denying false kings.

Anticipate Healing

So John starts off by making it clear who the Christ is not. Then, he moves on to letting people know who it is he is preparing them for.

John 1:21-28:

²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” ²²So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

After John has made it clear that he is not the Messiah, these messengers try to figure out who he is. He keeps saying no to their suggestions until they eventually get desperate. They are confused and they practically beg John to give them something. They were sent by some really important people. They can't go back empty handed. Please, tell us who you are.

And so he quotes Isaiah 40. This comes from one of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament. After 39 chapters of difficult stuff, Isaiah 40 begins, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” The passage goes on to say that Jerusalem will be saved, that the end of war

is near and that God is about to make himself known in Jerusalem.

John knows how they will hear this. The common people were tired of the Romans. They were oppressed and hurting and weak. They wanted—they needed—for things to change. They couldn't go on this way much longer.

But the Jewish leaders were different. They may not love the Romans, but for the most part, they had made their peace. Their lives were reasonably comfortable. They didn't really want anything to change. They certainly didn't want someone shaking things up and starting a revolution.

So the common people wanted change. The Pharisees didn't. But there was also a third group. There was a community of people who had separated themselves from the rest of Jewish life and lived in the desert. We refer to them as the Qumran community because that is the area where they settled.

They wanted things to change too. In fact, they used the same passage from Isaiah 40. They talked about the way being made straight in preparation for the Lord to arrive. But when they read that passage, they thought it spoke to them as a way of saying that they would be ready when the Messiah came even if no one else was. They were skeptical of anyone else and thought they probably deserved what they were getting anyway. Their idea was that they could escape to the desert and they could make themselves ready so that they wouldn't miss anything. But they had left everyone else behind.

The common people wanted change but didn't know how to get it. The religious leaders wanted to keep things the way they were. The Qumran community wanted things to change for themselves and be rid of everyone else.

Then John the Baptist comes on the scene. And he has a different message. His message is that things can get better. Much better. The warfare can stop. Peace can come. Real life is at hand. It's going to be available. And it's for everyone. Things can change. Not just for me. But for you too. For everyone.

That's a huge kind of offer. It's a dangerous offer.

The world is broken. Things aren't the way they are supposed to be. Three different ways to respond. Get by as best as you can and try not to rock the boat. Figure out the best way to live and keep it to yourself. Or help others to get ready for the healing that is coming. John the Baptist invites people to anticipate healing.

People want healing. We want healing. We need to be healed. John does a great job of letting people know that

things can get better. That's why they followed him. They wanted things to improve. He lived his whole life with this eager expectation of healing.

So on the one hand, we have to deny that false kings can offer the kind of change that we think they can. But we don't deny that such change is possible. We don't get bitter and settle for the status quo. We anticipate that healing is coming.

This is the message that people in our culture want to hear. People know that politics won't fix things. People know that money and relationships and success and whatever else is out there won't really make them happy. We know we want something more.

We can help people see that real healing is possible. The problem is that most people don't really respond to being told that "Jesus can fix your life." That sounds way too easy. Way too idealistic. But the truth is that healing is possible. Jesus does heal us. Sometimes quickly. Sometimes slowly as we allow ourselves to become immersed into a community of his followers and watch our hearts soften and change and grow.

One of the problems is that when you say that Jesus can heal us, most people don't believe in Jesus. So what they hear is "I can heal you." Or Christianity can heal you. Or my church can heal you.

That's pretty similar to what happened for John the Baptist. After he quotes Isaiah, these messengers have a new question. They say to him, "if you're not any of these important people, then what are you doing out here?" Basically, who are you to be saying that something incredible is coming?

They aren't asking him, "Why are you *baptizing*?" They are asking him, "Why are *you* baptizing?" Who are you to be offering healing? It's the same question that the people we know ask us. Who are you to tell me what to believe? Why should you be right and I be wrong? What gives you such special knowledge that you claim to know what is universally true for everyone?

There's an old rabbinic saying that probably dates from the time of Jesus that says "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong." That means that a disciple can do all the menial stuff: picking up laundry, fetching coffee, cleaning the donkey dung. But there's one task that's too low for a disciple to do: taking off the sandals of his master. That's just too gross. That's just too degrading.

John's answer to the question, "who are you to offer healing?" is to say that he is even less than they thought

he was. They're right. He isn't qualified. He is nothing. Less than nothing.

And it's that humility that draws people in. When Christians say that we are right and if you believe what we believe then you could be right too, it's not a very attractive message. But when we say that we are hurt and broken, but we are being healed through Jesus as we worship and serve and confess and try to love within a community, that's a completely different kind of a message.

We need to agree with John the Baptist that we aren't anything. But the one we worship is and when you worship him, real healing can come. First, we deny false kings that can't deliver what they promise. Then we anticipate the healing that can come from the real King. Finally, we recognize our King when he arrives.

John Identifies the King

The next scene takes place on the following day, but it is part of the whole story. It's not clear exactly whether the messengers from the Pharisees are still there, but the story makes it sound like John the Baptist is still addressing them. Here is how it plays out.

John 1:29-34:

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Do you know that feeling when you see someone you know in a place you don't expect them? One of your teachers in the grocery store? Or a co-worker at a restaurant? This may be what John the Baptist felt. He's doing his thing and then all of a sudden he sees Jesus walking toward him. All of a sudden, the moment he's been waiting for has arrived. Now, at last, he identifies the King.

But he does so in an odd way. John declares, "Behold, the Lamb or God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

This doesn't sound odd to us because we are so used to

it. But the phrase "Lamb of God" would not be familiar to John's readers. This is the only passage in the New Testament where it's used. John refers to Jesus as the Lamb all throughout Revelation. Paul and Peter both compare Jesus to the Passover Lamb once in their letters, but that's the only other place in all of the New Testament.

If this is a unique idea, what does it mean? While there's no reference to the "Lamb of God" in the Old Testament, there are plenty of lambs. When Abraham and Isaac walk up the mountain to worship God, Isaac asks his dad, "where is the lamb?" and God miraculously provides. The sacrificial system of Leviticus refers to lambs as one of the primary elements of temple worship. The Passover Lamb marked God's people for salvation when they were freed from Egypt. And Isaiah 53 mentions the Suffering Servant being led to the slaughter like a lamb.

It seems like what John is doing is drawing all these ideas together as he identifies Jesus. He is the Lamb from all those scenarios. He is the sacrifice. He is the Passover Lamb which led to freedom. He is the Lamb that took the place of Isaac and takes our place. He is the Lamb that is led to the slaughter for our sakes.

What an incredible image for Jesus to take over. Jesus is the Lamb of God.

John goes on to talk about Jesus existing before him. He refers to Jesus' baptism as the moment that the Spirit verified his testimony regarding Jesus. His first declaration about Jesus might have left people scratching their heads. But his final declaration is the climax of this moment. John declares, "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

The Son of God was a well-known title for the Messiah. The Son of God is a royal title given to the King who will return to govern God's people. The Son of God is what people were waiting for. They wanted a king. John has worked hard to prepare them and now he announces it. The King has arrived. This is the Son of God.

This is the grand finale of John's story. This is where he fulfills his purpose. This is where John completes his task of helping people to be ready for the King. He proclaims the identity of Jesus. He identifies him to the world.

The messengers would not have been happy. This is what they had feared. This is going to shake things up. This can't end well. This declaration begins what will be a constant and growing tension between Jesus and these religious leaders. They don't want things shaken up. As it turns out, they will go to great lengths to work against that.

And yet John proclaims who Jesus is without fear. He

knows it isn't what they want to hear, but it is what he has to say. Jesus is the King. I am not the Christ. Healing is coming. And finally, here is the one who will bring it. Our scene climaxes when John identifies the King. And that's what we can do as well. Identify the King.

It's not what our world wants to hear. The name of Jesus has practically become a curse word. It's what people exclaim when they do something wrong.

You can talk about God. You can talk about spirituality. You can talk about love and service and justice. But identifying Jesus will always get you in trouble. It's true in India. It's true in Palo Alto. It's true all over the world. The name of Jesus polarizes people.

"This is the Son of God." This is the one that we have been waiting for. John says that he has seen this and he has borne witness that it is true.

These two elements fit together like the two sides of a coin. "I have seen" and "I have borne witness." We are going to see this all throughout this gospel because this whole book is a story of Jesus who offers life to the world. As we hear that story, there are always two big applications. We receive that life and we proclaim that life. We come and see and we go and tell. We take it in and we send it out. We believe and we announce.

"I have seen that this is the Son of God." John the Baptist says that he has become convinced that Jesus is the King. He is the one who will bring healing. Are there ways that you need to see that in a new way? Is Jesus the King of your life? If you count yourself as a Christian, everything you believe is wrapped around who Jesus is. We do a lot of things around here. We study the Bible, we pray together, we share our lives, we go camping, we sing and we eat.

But it's all because Jesus is the King. It has to be centered on Jesus. He is the Son of God. We have seen that.

And we bear witness to that fact. John the Baptist identifies the King for his culture and we are invited to do the same for ours. It's really not that complicated. All John the Baptist does is proclaim the identity of Jesus. He just says who Jesus is. That's it. It's not really that hard.

I have to admit that it's hard for me to talk about Jesus with people who don't believe. I want so badly to be sensitive to all the social cues and conventions that our culture has. I want so badly not to offend. But this is all it is. I don't have to convince anyone. I don't have to argue

for it or even defend it. I just proclaim what I know to be true about Jesus. I believe Jesus to be the Son of God. The only Son of God the Father who died to take away the sins of the world. Put simply, Jesus is the King.

I have seen and have borne witness that Jesus is the Son of God.

Conclusion

And so this great story of John's hostile encounter with some very important people concludes with the announcement that the King has arrived. We don't see it here, but the hostility that began this encounter only grows. All throughout John's gospel there is growing tension between Jesus and the powers that be.

But next we'll find out that not everyone rejects this King. Every king has subjects—those who are loyal to him. Next week we'll see this King start to establish his kingdom. We'll see him calling out people to follow him.

We spend so much of our life getting ready for so many things. Are we ready to receive Jesus? For those who have never professed faith before, this could mean putting your faith in Jesus for the first time. For those who have believed for a long time, this could mean letting Jesus into some decision or attitude or part of your life that you have kept closed until now.

John the Baptist helps to prepare us for Jesus. We deny false kings. We anticipate real healing. And finally the King is identified.

Get ready for the King. Prepare yourself for Jesus.