



December 9, 2007

On Jordan's Bank

As we continue our sermon theme of a traditional church celebrating a traditional Christmas I'd like to remind you of where we've been. Two weeks ago we ended the last church year with a celebration of Christ the King Sunday. Last week we began the new year focusing on Christ and Christ's return at the end of time. I ended that sermon by saying that if we can honestly say that God is number one in our lives and we can say that our lives honestly show it we can be filled with the hope of Christ's return and the hope of our eternal home. We therefore are to encourage each other as we look forward to His return. Today I'd like to look at that hope and explore it a little bit more completely.

When I think of hope there's an image that comes to my mind; the image of a former student who met the nicest young man. She hoped that he was the one and eventually he did propose to her and there was great excitement. Then there was the wedding day and she was beaming, her hope was fulfilled and she just couldn't imagine things getting any better. Then she became pregnant again hope, requests for prayer, requests for a healthy baby, requests that she would be a good mom. This would be a major step in her and her husband's life. Nine months later she had a healthy baby boy and I can tell you she has realized her hope. She is an awesome mother.

This is the situation that John the Baptist and the people of Israel found themselves in. A situation of hope they were hoping for the Messiah to come and this word hope can also be used in describing the three groups that existed in Israel at that time. They were the people of hope. They hoped for the Messiah because they trusted God's word and they knew the Messiah would eventually

come. These people had hope and they looked forward to seeing God's fulfillment. Then there were the people of no hope. They didn't trust God's word and therefore they didn't have any hope. They lived for the day and that was it. And there were the people of hope part II. These are those people who hoped the Messiah that John described wasn't coming. Because that Messiah would certainly upset their position in life and make them change. Of these three groups only two came out to see John the people of hope, those who had hope in the Messiah were baptized and those who hopes that He wasn't the Messiah, came out to test to antagonize the ministry of John. But what did these two groups find?

Well lets see what Jesus said about John in Matthew 11: 7-11, "What did you go out into the dessert to see? A reed swayed in the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Wow, what a compliment. For Jesus to say there was no one greater is the highest praise anyone could receive. But what made John great? Let's take a look at that.

First of all, I have to say I have met several self-proclaimed prophets especially when I used to go to Washington D.C. These were individuals who tended to be quite loud, they tended to plant themselves right in the middle of the sidewalk or right in the front of the museums so that you would have to cross over the other side to get by them or really work to get around them. They would get in your face and basically they dared you to ignore them. They want your attention. Contrast that with John this great prophet that Jesus describes. He planted himself on the Jordan's bank in the middle of nowhere. To hear John you would have to make a sacrifice to get to him. You would have to take time off from work, get the donkey ready and put new soles on your sandals and pack for the journey. John didn't make it easy for them he made them work. Once they got there what did they see? A man in the most humble clothing with the most humble diet no house or parsonage and I can tell you this, he would not fit into the mold of the televangelists of America today. He wasn't asking for big offerings, didn't fly in on a leer jet here was a

humble person totally devoted to God. And his message very simply you've got to change your life. If your life is changed people will be able to tell, you'll bear fruit and looking at those who were comfortable with their position in life he said, don't think you can pull rank because you are a Pharisee a Sadducee or a descendant of Abraham, descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen, what matter is your life. Is your life and faith like a growing tree? Is the wood green in that tree? Are you bearing fruit? Because if not it's deadwood, its good only for fire, repent the kingdom of heaven is near.

Unfortunately I have run into people that were very much like the individuals that John was speaking about. Here he speaks about the Pharisees and the Sadducees who said we're the leaders we're members of the club we're the descendants of Abraham. But they didn't do anything about their faith. And I've met people who say I'm a member at Zion or I'm a member at this church or that church do they do anything about it? No, but they feel as long as they've got membership they're ok. This past year your elders have gone through our membership roster and we've approached every person who has claimed membership but has not been in church for the last year. What's interesting is some of the responses we've gotten. We had a couple of people who wanted us to just continue their membership and they sent us a check to keep that membership. We gave the check back, why? Well I think the message of John is clear, its time to change. There's others that sent letters back saying we want to stay in our membership we just don't feel its necessary to actually attend church. And the list goes on and on and these are the people that when they die they are going to want a pastor there and they're going to want a pastor to tell them that their loved ones in heaven but this is what John is saying here. Just because you have membership doesn't mean you're saved.

This reminds me of a story I read this week. Will Willimon, who is the president of the American Family Association, tells of this story. He went to the funeral for a relative of one of his church members at a small independent Baptist church in north Georgia. When the time came for the service the family processed down and the preacher began to preach. Will listened very carefully to this preacher. The preacher got pretty worked up and started to get quite loud and he said, "Its too late for Sam he might have changed something with his life but its too late for him now, its all over for him. He doesn't get

another chance but it ain't too late for you. People drop dead every day why wait? Today is the day repent, make your life count for something give your life to Jesus you never know what tomorrow may hold, repent." After the funeral Will got into his car and turned to his wife and said that was terrible I would never do that to a grieving family that had to be the most manipulative, inappropriate, tacky funeral I have ever heard. His wife sat there a moment and then looked at him and said you're right; of course the worst part is it was true. That pastor is probably as close as you're going to find to someone being like John the Baptist. His message was very similar to John the Baptist and the response from Will's wife was probably exactly what was going on at the time of John. People went out there, he cut to the very heart of the matter we sin we fall short of the glory of God we need to repent and we need to do it now.

John wasn't a man of gimmicks he was a man of truth; the truth is what people came to hear. He wasn't flashy that would detract from the message. He was committed he had to know that standing on the truth would create enemies but he didn't stop even when his life was on the line; John died for that commitment. As great as that is I still don't think that's the greatest thing about John. I think the greatest thing is that John was truly humble. I know I read this a couple months ago but listen to John's words in John 3:27-30 where John the Baptist says, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of Him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less." John knew that he was an instrument of God's word and he was content with that. When he saw the Messiah who would now get the attention he'd get the crowds he'd get the responses from the people John's response was I'm full of joy because his hope has been realized. John realized he would have to fade into the background and he was okay with that because he knew the Messiah.

John's job was to prepare the way of the Lord; this is the job of Advent and the message is still the same, repent, change, the kingdom of God is near. May we prepare the way for the Lord this Advent personally by repenting, by clearing our heart of all the clutter that's there and making room for the babe of Bethlehem to sit on the

throne of our heart. May we prepare the way for others by showing others what this Christmas is all about. Those three groups still exist people who do hope for a Messiah; people have no hope of a messiah and people who hope there really isn't a Messiah because it would make them have to change. I know I've talked about Christmas how upsetting it can be to see a store selling family trees instead of Christmas trees, to not see a nativity scene on public ground but you know I got an e-mail this week that put it all into perspective. So what if a nativity scene can't be in front of City Hall it can be in front of your house. May we take the time to make sure that we in every way are shining with all the love, the joy and hope of Christmas this year.

In our Savior's name, Amen.