

John the Baptist, we have all heard of him. The man who wandered in the desert, wore rough clothing, camel's hair, ate a diet of locusts and wild honey; he never drank liquor or wine. He was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb.

And he preached. All the people of his time had heard of him as well. People flocked to hear him preach. Crowds, common people, priests, Pharisees, they all walked the twenty miles down from Jerusalem to the River Jordan to hear John preach. They were not moved by John's emotional arguments. Yes, they were a people with deep emotions, full of hope, with certain expectation that God would again act in their lives. They celebrated how God had intervened in their history. Many times throughout history they had heard the voice of God. They knew God's promises, God's word; they tried their best to follow these words. Yet they were also people full of disappointment and suffering. It seems that God had not spoken to them in over four hundred years. There had been periods of captivity, strife; now they were under Roman rule.

John's message was harsh; easy to understand but very hard to accept. It does not matter who your ancestors were, God doesn't care. It doesn't matter how many times you go to the Temple, how many sacrifices you offer, God doesn't care. It doesn't matter if you have kept every religious law and regulation, God does not care.

God does care about who you are. God does care about what you offer to God. God does care about righteousness. The righteousness that is defined by your relationship to God, your personal relationship, not that of your ancestors. This righteousness is defined by doing the will of God in your life, offering your life as a living sacrifice to God. This righteousness is living within the fullness of God's loving example. It is less about how many times you wash your hands and all about whether you do what the LORD desires of you: To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

And when you did not live up to these impossible standards, John called for you

to confess your sins before God. Admit that you are not perfect, for only God is perfect. Start over again with a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). For that is the sacrifice that God seeks. Repent; come into the baptismal waters.

The crowd knew that baptism wasn't for Jews, for them, it was only for those outsiders who desired to become Jews. Only those who desired to join in full worship of the God of Israel would give themselves, and their family, a bath to wash the sins of the gentiles off their bodies.

Yet, the Jews did come to hear John the Baptist. They wondered if John was a new prophet. God had been silent for hundreds of years. There had been many who claimed to have spoken for God, yet the test of time had proven them wrong. Perhaps John was speaking a new word from God, or perhaps he was merely a Bath Qol, the “daughter of the voice” of God: a faint echo of what had been spoken in the past. Yet, John's message, whether new or merely the echo of past prophets, moved the crowd. It wasn't just an emotion. The crowds realized that what they thought they knew wasn't fully accurate. They suddenly had an “Aha!” moment as they realized that they had known all along, known that God wanted more than just their empty and routine actions. They knew, had always known, that they really did need to confess their sins. So they went into the water of the Jordan symbolizing their repentance and a desire for a new righteousness with God.

And then came Jesus. Jesus. The one that John had been pointing toward: the Son of God. Jesus, the one without sin is suddenly there, in the water of the Jordan, to be baptized for the repentance of sin. John does not understand, can not comprehend this request. He tries to talk Jesus out of this strange, almost bizarre, and incomprehensible idea.

I can imagine Jesus putting his arm on John's shoulder and saying, “Let's do this, John, right now. I know that it doesn't make sense to you, but humor me. I need to do

this to fulfill God's righteousness, God's plan for me.”

John almost sputters: “I don't understand! I know that you are the one without sin; you should be baptizing me! But, well, you know, when the Son of God asks me to do something, I guess I'd best be about doing it. If you insist, cousin, lets make it so!”

Immediately, just as Jesus is coming out of the water, things start to happen! First, the Spirit of God appears out of heaven like a dove. It came to rest upon Jesus. And a voice from within the opened heavens said “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”

How do you describe something for which there are no words, something that has not happened like this before?

When I was teaching Electrical Engineering. The students had to design and build a digital circuit to change the frequency of a signal. One cadet just did not understand this idea of frequency. I drew sin waves on the board, trying to explain the number of peaks, or cycles, per second. I took her into the lab and showed her the same thing on an oscilloscope. I described frequency mathematically; all to no avail.

As the due date approached, I was really worried for her. I even met her at the library on Sunday afternoon to give it one last try. As we talked, she mentioned that she was the secretary of the cadet gospel choir. I asked her to sing an 'A'; then another 'A' an octave apart. The A above middle C has a frequency of 440 cycles per second, each A an octave apart is either twice or half that frequency. She had an “Aha!” moment: she suddenly understood frequency. She almost had tears of joy as she realized that she had understood frequency for a long time, she just had not known that she understood.

And so it is with the dove, and the voice that came out of the heaven. All the Greek nuances, the history of the people, God's promises, all the intellectual arguments will not convince you that this was not merely a dove and another Bath Qol, another echo of God's voice, but rather the Holy Spirit and the very voice of God. This wasn't

like thunder, a sound that comes from the sky. This was sound that came from the opened heavens, came from within the heavens. I can't make it real for you. I can only hope that you have your own "Aha!" moment.

Talk about a day to remember! For the crowd at the River Jordan, it suddenly didn't seem important whether they had been baptized yet or were still waiting their turn. Any doubts about the message of John suddenly disappeared. Exactly the person that John had told them about was here, at this river, now. They had heard the voice of God, they saw the Spirit descend and rest upon Jesus. God was alive and active, prophecy did come true.

And for us, isn't the message still the same?

It does not matter who our ancestors were, God doesn't care. It doesn't matter how many times we come to church, how many sacrifices we offer, God doesn't care. It doesn't matter if we have kept every religious law and regulation, God does not care. God does not care **if** we do these things because we think we have an obligation to do so. God does not care **if** we do these things thinking that they alone will earn us a place in heaven. It doesn't matter who our parents were, how much we give out of obligation, what rules we follow.

God does care about who we are. God cares because Jesus was one of us; he lived as a human, had the same joys and concerns that we have. Jesus came to offer us something more than our family connections can offer. Jesus came so that we too might be part of the family of God.

God does care about what we offer to God. God wants us to give, thankful for all that we have been given. God has blessed us with riches far beyond a bank account balance. God invites us to find joy and peace as we offer hope and love to others.

God does care about our righteousness. This isn't the rule based righteousness of the Pharisees. God wants us to seek God's will for our lives through prayer and

meditation and study. This righteousness is being in a right relation with God. And this relationship is available, always. It does not matter if we have sinned. John offered baptism for those who repented of their sins. Jesus offers forgiveness for those who confess their sins. It is exactly when we are less than perfect, when we have had troubles in our lives, even if they are caused by our own poor decisions, that God is there to offer us complete forgiveness and welcome us back with His love.

We may never come out of a river and have the Spirit descend like a dove and alight upon us.

But I hope that each of us knows, really knows, that God still says to each one of us, that we, you and you and you, are his daughters and sons, God still says that he loves us and that is greatly pleased.

Amen.