

He Came Preaching
Matthew 3:1-12
December 24, 2023

As another year of Christmas movies is celebrated on the Hallmark Channel, there are Christmas movies 24 hours a day from October 20th to the new year. The Lifetime Channel is doing something similar. Christmas movies are all around. Some are pretty good and others not so good. And, of course there are a number of classic Christmas movies which have been people's favorites for years. The Christmas Carol, The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, The Christmas Story and It's a Wonderful Life are among them. The one I love the most as I have mentioned before is the colorized version of the 1947 Christmas classic Miracle on 34th Street. Natalie Wood plays a seven-year-old whose mother is the director of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. She has to deal with the crisis of a drunken Santa Claus, who she replaces just before the parade. Natalie watches the parade from an apartment window. She comments on the massive balloon characters and on how much better this Santa is than the one from the previous year. Fifty years after this movie came out NBC was showing the parade on television. As the parade was moving toward its conclusion, "the excitement of the announcer's voice made it obvious that Santa, and his reindeer were just around the corner. It was then that a small float came wheeling down the street with the wise men, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. The NBC announcer excitedly proclaimed, 'Here comes the one who got the whole thing started!'" (1)

What he said is so right. Jesus is the center of the Christmas season, but our focus this morning is on Jesus' older cousin John. Jesus got the whole thing started, but his cousin John the Baptizer was "the one who got the whole thing started for Jesus!" (2) If John had not answered God's call on his life to begin preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River, Jesus would never have been baptized by him and begun his ministry. It was a God thing. If Jesus had remained a carpenter in Nazareth, we would never have heard of him, but John kick-started Jesus' ministry and mission proclaiming, "but after me will come one who is more powerful than I." (Matt. 3:11b)

A brief once-over of our text for this morning and we see that John looks at the world a little differently than others. He is a man on a mission as he boldly proclaims a message the world needs to hear. John is the long-awaited herald. Israel has not heard the words and warnings of a prophet for nearly five hundred years. John came preaching in the desert of Judea and baptizing in the Jordan River. He is definitely on the strange side which was nothing new for a prophet. For one thing, he has a distinctive wardrobe and diet. His "clothes were made of camel hair and...his food was locust and wild honey." (Matthew 3:4) John certainly did not have the best of dress or cuisine.

If I were to go down to the local clothing store and ask to buy a camel hair sports coat I probably could, but it would have no resemblance to the one John wore. John wore the real thing. Where I pastored a little over twenty-five years ago, there was a small petting zoo that a farmer had a few miles down the road. You could just stop by if you wished to see the peacocks, sheep, goats, ostriches, and an old worn-out camel. He was friendly enough, but ugly, smelly, and needed some dental work. His coat was tangled, matted, and ragged. John had a coat like that of camel hair. John made quite an impression, but he wouldn't have made the cover of GQ Magazine. He is probably not the guy you would want moving in next door or to join you for breakfast. The portrait of him we see in the gospels makes him seem rather strange. He marched to a different drumbeat, but the people of Judea and Jerusalem flocked to the Jordan River to hear him. He was a curiosity, certainly different and someone to talk about at the village gate. However, that was not his true attraction. What drew people to John the Baptist was his message. John urged people to acknowledge their past sin, to do an about-face with their life and repent. John followed repentance with baptism; something new for a prophet and for Jews. "Baptism was not new to John's audience. They knew of baptism for Gentile converts, but had not heard that descendants of Abraham needed to repent and be baptized." (3) John preached that both were necessary.

John was not as wide-eyed and wild as he appeared but actually came from the best of stock. His parents were elderly and his father Zachariah was a priest who one day had the lot fall on him to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense on behalf of all the people. There were thousands of priests and to have this privilege fall on Zachariah was a once-in-a-lifetime happening. While in this sacred place, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel tells Zachariah that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son and that he is to be named John. Zachariah cannot quite believe his ears and questions Gabriel saying that both he and his wife are well along in years. He is told by Gabriel that he is going to be silent until after John's birth. On the eighth day of John's life when he was to be circumcised and named, the family wanted to name him after his father Zachariah, but Elizabeth said he was to be named John. They protested that no one in their family was named John. They then turned to Zachariah and made signs to him to ask what the name should be and he asked for a writing tablet and wrote John. "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak, praising God." (Luke 1:64)

John was a true prophet speaking for God by calling his listeners to repentance and renewal. John did not pull any punches. What did he say? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Quoting Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him." (Isaiah 40:3-5) In addition, for the Pharisees and Sadducees he had these strong words of condemnation, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Matthew 3:2, 3:3b & 3:7b) Did he call the people to task? Yes! He called them to a higher standard of preaching, that they were to repent, for the kingdom of heaven was near. He

wanted them to take the high road in life. Did he instill fear in them? Yes! But fear is not always bad, especially when it is used to point to the consequences of misbehavior. Fear can help us turn the corner in life, and it can remind us to take life seriously. Fear can be a good deterrent, but it should not dominate our lives. Our love of God should be the dominating force. If we have any fear of God in our lives, it should not be fear for the sake of fear, but fear out of reverence for the Almighty.

“Listen to what John Calvin wrote of how a fear of God should yield to a love of God. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, he wrote, *‘all who have at any time groped about in ignorance of God will admit that the bridle of the law restrained them in some fear and reverence toward God until, regenerated by the spirit they began wholeheartedly to love him.’*” (4)

John blazed the trail. Like a road grader, he straightened out the roadway and leveled the rough places. He knew that he was only the beginning and that one greater than he was to follow. One he said, “whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” (Matthew 3:11c) This is the work of a slave and John, this prophet of God, says that he is not even worthy. John had an important message. He spoke about the need for repentance. We all need repentance, a turning away from our self-centeredness to look toward God. Repentance is a starting point for our Christian journey and a cornerstone of Christian faith. “We cannot be content with mere lip service to our faith.” (5) Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “a little water on your head when you are born, a little rice on your head when you get married and a little dirt on your head when you die does not make you a Christian.” (6) Christianity is more than a little water, a little rice, and a little dirt. It is more than a religion. Christianity is a living relationship with God, through Christ made real through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christmas celebrations often miss the truth of God’s love for his children. God came into the world in a new manner as a child: dependent, humble, and yet ready to leave his mark on society. Jesus came to show people how to live and to give them the opportunity and power to live abundantly and eternally through faith in him. Christmas’ true center is Jesus and his love for everyone. But it too often stresses materialism. What will I get? What can I give? How can we celebrate? “Christmas did not happen in a vacuum.” (7) It happened in the real world. It was part of a long process planned since the beginning of time for the salvation of people. Christmas is more than giving and receiving gifts. It is a remembrance and celebration of all of God’s work in bringing salvation to a lost and hurting world.

John saw things differently. He understood that he was instrumental in the coming of the Messiah into the world. He stood at the edge of the Jordan River and boldly proclaimed that there was one coming that was more powerful than he. He preached that a new time was coming. John announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, which was a new reality and a new way of life. Since his announcement, the world has never been the same. It is hard for us to imagine what life would be like if God had not sent his Son into the world. As

John 3:17 says, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Jesus has turned much of the world upside down. In the process, he has asked his followers to be his ambassadors. Telling them that they are to see the world differently and to live differently as a part of the Kingdom of God. That is what makes Christianity so exciting as John the Apostle wrote in his first letter, “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life.” (1 John 5:12)

Jesus is the good news of God first proclaimed by John the Baptizer who called people to a new way of life. A life of repentance and forgiveness and of excitement and joy! A Christmas life! Every day is Christmas for the Christian. The true Christmas gift is Jesus living in the heart of the believer. The television announcer watched a drab little float make its way down Fifth Avenue and he proclaimed, “Here comes the one who got the whole thing started!” Let us not miss the real parade!

In the summer of 2016 during my vacation in July, I went to the upper peninsula to visit family and friends in Marquette. On the way home, I was traveling on M-28 and although I have traveled that road many times, for the first time I stopped in Christmas, Michigan. I had a nice visit in Christmas and sent a card to myself. To be in Christmas in July was fun, but Christ came that we might celebrate Christmas *every day of the year!* As Christians, we are to join John as messengers of the one who is our joy. Emmanuel, “God with us” every day!

Amen!

- (1) Dynamic Preaching November-December 1997 p. 39
- (2) Ibid. p. 39
- (3) NIV Study Bible p. 1934 “notes”
- (4) Dynamic Preaching November-December 1997 p. 41
- (5) Ibid. p. 42
- (6) Ibid. p. 42
- (7) Dynamic Preaching Oct., Nov., Dec., 2000 p. 67 He Came Preaching