

Matthew 3:1-17

Repent! And Other Words That Get Our Attention

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*Title Slide

After I chose my sermon title this week, before writing the sermon of course, I started to think about the things that get people's attention. I remembered the time in my new elementary school when, as I was balancing my lunch room tray to pick up silverware, the whole thing went careening to the floor. I pretty much had everyone's attention at that point.

I remembered being about 8 months pregnant and passing out in a room full of nurses. It turns out, nurses pay attention to that sort of thing.

And I remembered my son Andrew at about 3 years old, having left the church nursery to use the restroom, unable to get his pants up on his own, rather than returning to the nursery, took the elevator upstairs to the sanctuary where he knew he could find me. He had the congregation's attention as he stood in the doorway at the front of the sanctuary with his pants around his ankles, motioning to people to get my attention.

Or this one...Have you ever tried to have a conversation with people in a really noisy restaurant, maybe while there is live music happening? You talk to the ones at your table in a loud voice, then they answer in a loud voice so you can hear them. And then, have you ever been in the midst of the conversation when the music suddenly stopped? And everyone in the place hears you yell something like, "The band is awful."

Nothing like getting everyone's attention.

Some of the words in this week's text are attention getters like that, they kind of stop us in our tracks and make us pay attention. The first part of Matthew 3 is about John the Baptist, who reminds me of street preachers I've seen and heard. In fact, I've heard street preachers, with their bull horns, quote directly from this passage, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That's the kind of ruckus John was making in the wilderness of Judea. He was a prophet who chose to stay outside the cities which were the centers of power. He loudly proclaimed the coming of an empire very different from the Roman Empire. With his camel hair clothing and diet of locusts and honey, he connected with the people in the rural areas who were poor and marginalized.

People came from all over to be baptized by this rowdy, tell it like it is man. He had two important messages for his followers. First, repent! Turn *from* your sinful ways and turn *toward* God...now. And second, the one who is coming isn't going to have time for your shenanigans. Get it together or there will be "unquenchable fire" for you. John could be kind of harsh. His wilderness preaching reminds me of a line from the book *Resident Aliens* by theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon.

*Neither author has ever taken full responsibility for this line which is, indeed, in their book and says, "...one of us is tempted to think there is not much wrong with the church that could not be cured by God calling about a hundred insensitive, uncaring, and offensive people into ministry." That is kind of how John the Baptist is depicted in this story. He was a truth-teller who didn't mince words and was not easily intimidated.

John's ministry in the wilderness had similarities with the time the Israelites spent in the wilderness after Moses led them from Egypt. In both wildernesses there was judgment and there was salvation. This is important to Matthew's story because he was writing for a community

who identified as Jewish. Connecting the stories of Jesus to the stories of Israel bolstered the author's case that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah.

The wilderness, for the Israelites following the Exodus, was like this: Having been liberated from Pharaoh, the people miraculously passed through the waters of the parted Red Sea, the Israelites whined and complained, going so far as wishing to be back in Egypt, as slaves, even as God continued to save them, providing manna and birds to eat, sweet water to drink, and the revelation of Godself through Moses on Mt. Sinai. God took care of the people, but their actions and lack of faith had consequences-as the generation of people freed from Egypt never saw the Promised Land. The Israelites were granted entrance only after all of the whiners and complainers died.

Likewise, in John's wilderness, there was judgment and warning for the ones who had turned their backs on God's ways, demonstrating a lack of faith. And there was freedom for the ones who confessed their sins and were baptized. And there were many people who were eager for the opportunity to start over. This offer of redemption was problematic, though, for Jerusalem's religious leaders because maintaining the relationship between the people and God was reserved for the temple and the sacrificial system controlled by the high priests and the priestly class. So, they paid John a visit.

*⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

As I read this, I kind of cringe at the thought of this passage being the one a first-time visitor to our church might hear. I imagine one of you saying to your friend at lunch on Thursday, “Come to my church. We love and welcome everyone.” And then they come and I launch into this text, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Good times.

*The Greek in this passage is a little unclear, in verse 7, “But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming *for* baptism...” The Greek word “epi” can mean either *for* or *against*. In the New Revised Standard Version, on the screen, “epi” is translated *for*, so let’s go with that today. These religious leaders came from Jerusalem, having heard of John, seeking baptism, not because they were planning to change their ways, but because they were a big deal, they thought they deserved it. John was having none of it and threatened them with the one who will come after him, Jesus, who would whip them into shape.

As we move through the Gospel of Matthew this winter and spring, I think we will see that John misunderstood, and I don’t think he was the only one, the kind of messiah Jesus would be. I think John’s and Jesus’ messages were similar-in order to turn toward God, we have to turn away from other things. However, John’s depiction of Jesus as a scorched-earth savior, wielding an ax of destruction and burning everything in his wake doesn’t align with the stories of a humble Jesus who submitted to baptism and a compassionate Jesus who interpreted Jewish law through a lens of love. Jesus got mad, and rightly so, but he

was not generally a hell, fire, and brimstone kind of guy. And his anger was usually reserved for the people in power who took advantage of the one who were vulnerable.

This brings us to the Jesus part of today's text:

* Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Aahhhh...that's better. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." Definitely better than the "brood of vipers" and "unquenching fire" stuff. Scholars love to debate why Jesus was baptized. Rather than delve into that, I think what would be more helpful is for us to consider that baptism suggests transformation and turning toward, rather than only turning from our sins. Jesus' baptism in Matthew suggests a transformation, sort of a rite of passage. It also, once again, connects the story of Jesus to the overarching story of Israel.

And throughout this story, whenever God's people passed through water, they were transformed into something entirely different. When Moses and the Israelites passed through the waters following their escape from Egypt, they entered the water as slaves and left liberated. In the parallel story when the waters were parted for Joshua and the people entering the promised land, they stepped into the water as wanderers and left as inhabitants of the land God gave them. Jesus

entered the water as one who was created and called and left commissioned to begin the work for which he was created and called. He would be the one to proclaim God's reign over and above the reign of Rome. For Matthew's community, he would be the messiah. And in that very moment, God was there, claiming him and naming him, "...my Son, the Beloved."

The words spoken by the heavenly voice echo two passages from the Hebrew scriptures. The first is Psalm 2:7, interpreted by the early church as God's word to Jesus saying, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." The second is the beginning of Isaiah 42:1-4, which reads "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased."

This passage from Isaiah was important for the author of Matthew, who will quote it again, referencing Jesus, in chapter 12:17-21. I wondered if hearing this full passage from Isaiah might help us appreciate Matthew's understanding of what Jesus came to do.

Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.

Applied to Jesus, from the author of Matthew's point of view, Isaiah envisions a messiah that transforms the world without trampling on the ones who are weak and vulnerable. Not a fan of chemical weapons, tanks, and drone strikes, this messiah tenderly loves the world until

justice comes. This marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry; the beginning of the work God chose for him. And before he does anything, before he calls his first disciple, before he teaches anybody anything, before he demonstrates God's love to a hurting world, God calls him Beloved.

*I believe God has the same deep affection for each one of us. Before we do anything. Before we figure out what we should do with our lives, before we lift a finger to bring about justice, before we show even a little bit of compassion for our neighbors, before we are aware God is God, God calls each one of us Beloved. And that ought to get our attention.

I sometimes think the thing we need to turn from the most is the way we think about ourselves. We think we aren't good enough or smart enough or talented enough or thin enough...so many "not enoughs." And these "not enoughs" convince us we don't belong. It's all a lie though. You are enough. You belong...to all of us and to God. You are God's beloved child. Amen.