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“You better watch out!” **Sermon on Matthew 3:1-12**

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You may have heard, "You'd better watch out!"

You may have heard, "He's making his list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty and nice."

You may have heard, "He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake."

What you haven't heard is that John the Baptist wrote those lyrics. You remember John.

From the Gospel Matthew 3: 1-12

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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.

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. "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. 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."

You'd better watch out! "Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near!" John knows it. Feels it! He can almost touch it! The Kingdom of Heaven is the moment when God's reign and rule restores justice, peace, and love. "Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near!" It's taken a while to get so close.

John will say that the words came from the Prophet Isaiah. The Prophet Isaiah was 700 years prior to John the Baptist. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!" Seven hundred years before John - that's a long, long, long time to wait and hope! What's the longest you've waited in hope for anything? The shorter your hopes, I suspect, the better off you are!

Some people have hopes they never get to see come true. As Martin Luther King said in Memphis one evening, "I have a dream, I may not get there with you..." He was right. He was killed the next day, probably because not all people shared his hope. He had a long hope. In our country's history, there are the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." When those words were written, those "self-evident truths" weren't truths to all people. They were hopes. Long-time hopes.

I was surprised at my ignorance; my ignorance probably doesn't surprise you, but I was surprised when we were celebrating the 100th anniversary of a woman's right to vote. We did that during the heart of COVID. I was surprised it was only 100 years. I thought that at least it had to be around 150 years or more. It never occurred to me that my grandmother gained the right to vote in her lifetime.

You can say, "All people are created equal, but until 'all people' live that out, those words are a lie for some. Or, to put it more positively, it's a hope for some. A long-time hope. They are the same ones who need God to show up and set things straight! To shake some people out of their ignorance! That God would bring a day when the valleys would be lifted up, the mountains brought low. That God would bring a day when the wolf would have no power or dominion over the lamb. A day when the cow would have no fear of the bear! A night when the lion would plop his teeth into a glass of Efferdent, so that the calf can get some sleep.

That's a long-time hope! Seven hundred years ago, the Prophet Isaiah spoke it; said, John.

And now the Kingdom has drawn near! John said it! And people believed it! All the people came out to be baptized. All the people! How did he do that? Was it the conviction of his speech? Was it his charisma? How did he sell it? Because we tend to have a word for those people who shout and yell, "You'd better watch out! The Lord is coming!" And that word is, "Crazy!" We just dismiss that.

It's hard to sell the "Lord is coming!"

During Advent, we kind of squeak out, "Lord Jesus, come soon!" Not a lot of enthusiasm for Jesus coming back. We don't need Jesus to come soon when you're waiting for grandchildren, when your second house is near completion, or when you have tickets for a cruise, or when retirement is just around the corner. Jesus, if you could hold off a moment!"

I'm just saying that the human condition hasn't changed a bit since the beginning of time. It's hard to bat 1,000 in the "get your act together, the Messiah is coming" department. But John has everyone coming out of the woodwork. I don't know how he did it!

Oratory skills? Charisma? The Spirit of God is at work, pushing people out of their comfort zone. Was it his Popularity? "Have you been down to see John? Have you been down to see John? I got baptized the other day. I think the Messiah is coming! I'm a changed person!" They came! They all

came! Some to get straight with God. Some came, I suppose, to feel better! Some to get on the right side of history. "If he does come, better to be wheat than chaff." Some, I suppose, came to hedge their bets!

As the retired lawyer said to me, "You don't know me. I don't come to church, but I give to the church, just so that you'll do my funeral."

That's when I wish I could be Baptist! "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!"

But I chose Presbyterian! Dang it! Can you imagine John the Baptist out there saying to that brood of vipers, "Friends, there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less. There's nothing you can do to make God love you any more. God loves us all the same! Would you like to be sprinkled?" You know, John took each one of those snakes and baptized them, full immersion. Full immersion for a long, long, long time. That's what preachers want to do. I mean, scare the living daylights out of them. Till that snake could feel the Kingdom of Heaven drawing near.

You'd better watch out! The Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near!
You'd better watch out! His winnowing fork is in his hand,
You'd better watch out! He will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John's hope was that "you'd better watch out! He believed that the Messiah would have an ax to grind against those who bore no fruit. He believed the Messiah would come and divide people into wheat and chaff. That was his hope!

In a few chapters, we'll find John has been arrested and is now in prison. While there, John reviewed his theology. You don't do a lot in prison, but you can review your theology. Fire, ax, wheat, and chaff, and he measured the hope of his theology against Jesus. This prompted him to yell out to some of his followers who happened to be outside the prison, "Hey, go find Jesus and ask him, are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for another?"

Imagine being disappointed that the Lord God didn't live up to your hopes.

The kingdom of heaven isn't what you hoped for. That's kind of the story of our faith, right? There's an older brother on a farm and he can tell you he's not going to go to that party because the kingdom of heaven isn't what he hoped for. There's a young, rich lawyer who not really happy because the answer Jesus gave wasn't what he hoped for. There's another one who is upset because his neighbor isn't one he hoped for. Just some guy over the border.

We know the story, for we know a table, the body and blood. We know that Jesus didn't win the popular vote. They all came out of the woodwork and wanted him dead. That's the story – that Jesus wasn't what we hoped for.

But just when you think all hope is lost, God resurrects this one who isn't what we hoped for, in the hopes that one day we'll see that he is exactly what we hoped for.

You'd better watch out! Don't let your hopes for God get in the way of who God is.

The other day, I went out to interview on camera some folks who had been helped by Westminster Home Connection. I prepared for it the same way I used to prepare for my old job at the news station. I told one woman that I spoke with that I may ask the same question three times in order to find that "something" I was looking for her to say. She didn't need three takes. She said she was so happy that people came in from Westminster to fix her sink and the door in the bathroom that wasn't working.

She shared with me that she had a job, but then got sick. "I was going to the doctor, I backed out of my driveway and ran over my mailbox." She wasn't watching out. Her throat caught, and she said, "I thought to myself, what else can go wrong?"

When she returned home from the doctor, her mailbox was up. You would have thought we gave her a billion dollars. Tears running down her cheeks. "Your folks had put my mailbox back up. I didn't ask them to do it! I don't know you people! Yet still, you came to my rescue!"

In a world full of problems, it's not a big deal for a mailbox to be fixed in north Nashville. Unless you talk to that woman – it's like the ages shifted.

In my ministry, I will keep that story in my heart for as long as I live. I love it when the church gets it right. When hope is so close, you can feel it, you can taste it; it's amazing. She said, "You're almost a savior; you rescued me!" And I wanted to tell her, "No, you rescued me because you make me believe in the One who is to come. And that One is already here, bearing fruit."

You better watch out!

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