

WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?

Imagine for a moment that you are standing on the banks of the Jordan River, watching the scene of the story we just read unfold before you. Let me see if I can help describe it for you. The Jordan River is about 50 feet wide- not very big by our standards. Palestine is hot. It experiences what we would a tropical Mediterranean climate; that is, it has a wet season and a dry season. You might think of the coast of California as an example. Along the coast it's lush, but as you move inland it becomes drier and becomes a desert.

You are part of a great multitude that is coming out to see John the Baptist. He is preaching in the desert by the banks of the Jordan River. Now, that's significant because normal people in Ancient Palestine didn't do stuff like that. In fact, if you think too hard about John the Baptist, it's hard to escape the notion that John is just a little crazy. He doesn't work. He lives out in the desert. He wears camel hair and eats locusts and wild honey. The other thing about it is he's not afraid to say what's on his mind, no matter whom it might offend.

Normal people just don't do this kind of stuff. If looks a little crazy to you, realize it would have looked just as crazy to other people in that world. What's unusual is that so many people took him seriously. To see how unusual that is, imagine this. Pick any large American City. Now, imagine thousands of people flocking into the inner city, going there to be healed of their maladies, to hear the gospel preached, and to be baptized into the Kingdom of Heaven. The thing is they're not going to an inner-city church. They're going to see a homeless person who has a reputation as holy man. That's a modern analogy to what happens in the story I just read you. That's how remarkable this story is.

As we imagine ourselves gathered there on the banks of the Jordan, John preaches a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins- a remission which will restore their place as children of God.

When the Luke relates this story, he interprets it through the scriptures themselves. Specifically, he identifies John as the "Voice crying in the wilderness," of which Isaiah speaks. You would think he would be flattered and overjoyed by the large crowd that comes out to see them. I might have been. I might have said, "Wow! Look at all these people who came out to see me." I've never spoken before a crowd of thousands, though on rare occasions I have spoken to a crowd of hundreds. However, that wasn't John's reaction.

He referred to the crowd as a brood of vipers. The Greek here literally means the offspring of snakes. That's a grave insult, and keep in mind he's standing out there all by himself insulting thousands of people that are standing in the crowd. He's delivering this to a crowd of thousands. We can admire his guts if not his judgment. He says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" In other words, "Why did you come here?"

That's a great question. It's a question for all of us. If you're not seeking repentance, why did you come here? Why did you need somebody to bless you if you're already righteous? If you haven't sinned, why did you come?

Well, that question that John asks the crowd, is one we could- and perhaps should- be asking ourselves. It's certainly a question I should be asking myself. It's a question I need to ask. Why did we come to church this morning? Was it because you were raised to believe it's the right thing to do? Is it because mom and dad always went here? Is it because you want to be saved? Is it because we want to be surrounded by our friends? Is it because we want to be surrounded by the beauty of the church that's decorated just so for Christmas? We could ask that question for ourselves just as much as for the people standing in front of John.

So, the people by that riverbank acted predictably. They asked John a question. "What then shall we do?" When I first saw that they asked this question, I assumed that they asked it sort of ironically. They didn't really mean, "What do we do?", they mean, "*What* do you want to us to do?". Now, I think differently. These people are scared, and John's question, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" feeds that fear. They know they're not holy and they're scared.

The thing is that if someone asked me that same question, I might be just as defensive. I'm also very aware of the fact that I'm not holy. I'm not perfect. I make mistakes. I sin against people. I'm very aware of that. I might find myself answering the same question the same way, "What then shall I do?"

John answers this question. "If you have two tunics, give one away, and if you have food do likewise." He singled out a few groups for special answers, beginning with the tax-gatherers. They asked him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" He said to them, "Collect only what you have been ordered to collect."

He also singled out a group of soldiers. They asked him, "And what about us, what should we do?" He told them, "Do not extort any money or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages."

Now, the advice that he gave them is not exactly earth-shattering. It's not really rocket science. What's amazing is that the answer is so simple. When I was in high school my sister, Linda, was awakened one night to a flapping sound. It turned out a bat had gotten into her room and she heard was its wings beating against the ceiling as it flew. Linda jumped up out of bed, raced into the hall, and shut the door to her room. Then she went downstairs to awaken my dad. Well, one thing you need to know about my dad, was that dad was a heavy sleeper. He was not easy to rouse, and when he arose, his brain was not always working on all cylinders. So, when Linda told him there was a bat in her room, he recommended she sleep somewhere else. That's not rocket science. That's what she planned to do anyway, I'm sure.

The people know what to do. We know what to do. The important thing is that we do it for the right reasons. The important thing is that they do it for the right reasons.

John is standing on the bank, not to get people to save themselves- they can't do that, we all know that, they can't do that- but to prepare themselves to be saved. Make your lives about the Kingdom of Heaven before you get saved, not after. Make your lives about the Kingdom so that when Jesus does come you will be ready. That's John's message to them.

So, people on that river bank started to talk. "Who is this guy? Could he be the Christ? Could he be the messiah? Is this who we've been waiting for?"

But John says, "No, I'm not the messiah. I baptize with water, but there is one who is coming who is greater than I, and I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." I think there's a lesson in that. It's a lesson in humility. John is unassuming. He doesn't take the high ground. Instead, he points to the Christ who is to come. No matter how much I've done, or any of us have done, there is someone who is coming who is greater. His name is Jesus Christ, and he loves you.

You see we have an advantage over the people who were listening to John on the banks of that river that day. They lived before Christ came. We live after. We don't have to prepare ourselves for Christ to come; he has already come. Nevertheless, John's message rings true for us. The people on that bank needed to prepare themselves for Jesus to come, so they needed to seek righteousness in preparation for Jesus to come. We should seek righteousness because Jesus came.

Jesus Christ has a power that the rest of us don't have. It's a power that can give you strength, courage, energy, dedication, and hope. That's what John is really after. John calls us to call upon the power of God to help us serve the kingdom. John tells us to go out into the world doing all things in the name of the Christ. Not, so that we can be saved- Jesus Christ does that for us, but so that the Kingdom of God may be increased and the glory of God may show forth in creation.

So, go forth. Be god's servants. The king is coming again and we need to be ready. The king has come and we need to be righteous.