

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Dearly Loved by God,

If you spend much time driving through mountain passes, you'll quickly be able to tell when an especially unusual event is coming up, like a sharper curve or a steep descent.

How can you tell? The SIGNS!

You will begin to see signs, early and often, BIG signs, flashing signs, and lots of signs.

The signs are to draw your attention to that event in the road.

As we consider our text for meditation this morning, consider John the Baptist as such a sign.

As follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said,] "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (ESV)

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)

What we just read came immediately after the appointed Gospel, which reported how Jesus spoke of John.

Remember that John the Baptist had been imprisoned and had sent his disciples to Jesus, asking Him if He were the coming one, or if they should look for another.

Instead of simply saying, "Yes, I am the coming One,"

Jesus encouraged them to think about what they were witnessing,

and consider if what they saw and heard fulfilled the prophecies of old, especially of Isaiah.

As John's disciples were returning to him, Jesus affirmed John's ministry,

and not only affirmed it, but even showed the people that John himself was a fulfillment of prophecy.

And if we take a step back and consider what the people might have been thinking and wondering about John and his very brief ministry, we can see more of what Jesus is doing here.

Remember that John had been very popular among the people.

The people were flooding to him... even out in the wilderness.

Many recognized the truth in his preaching, repented, and were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

But his ministry had been rather short... as suddenly as he had come on the scene,

so suddenly had Herod removed him from it... by imprisoning him.

Some might have been wondering if John's ministry was really from God;

after all, the OT is full of prophets who performed great miracles and were protected from harm.

But John performed no visible miracles, and he now was sitting in prison.

Was this a sign of God's displeasure? Was John just another of those passing religious fads?

Next week, we will hear a contingency of men sent by the religious leaders of the day ask John,

Who are You? ... Are you Elijah?

And John will emphatically answer, "no," because they were wondering if he were Elijah himself,

who had returned from heaven after being assumed into heaven, not having died an earthly death.

And yet, Jesus here says, **"and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."**

The **"Elijah who is to come"** was foretold by the last prophet of the OT, by Malachi.

In the last chapter of his prophecy, which is also the last chapter of the OT, we read:

Malachi 4:5-6

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”

You see, John’s ministry was rather unique among the prophets... other prophets were never foretold.

Moses didn’t prophecy about the coming of Isaiah.

Samuel didn’t prophecy about the coming of Daniel.

But Malachi did prophecy about John, and Jesus tells us why, as he quoted from Malachi:

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.” Malachi 3:1

While John’s ministry was to be very brief, it was to serve a very important purpose – as a sign. He was preparing the way before Jesus.

While all the other prophets of the OT were signs in history, preparing the people for the big event, (just as Jesus said, **“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,”**)

John was THE sign posted right at the event, pointing directly to Jesus, saying,

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Don’t let it escape you that Jesus quotes, **“he will prepare the way before Me.”**

Jesus was telling the people, that He, the long expected “Emmanuel” had come.

And this is what gives John that primacy **among those born of women that there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**

It wasn’t that John was more religious or more holy than all others **born of women,**

but that his role, not only pointing to Jesus but directly at Him was the greatest a person could ever serve.

And by God’s grace he did so faithfully... even from the jail cell.

And what a sign!

You know how signs will often portray the event they are warning of,

like a semi-truck overturning on a really sharp curve?

John serves as such a sign as well.

For those wondering about John’s imprisonment, if that were a sign of God’s displeasure,

Jesus would say unequivocally, **“NO!”**

He said, **From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force....** or at least try...

Already, in St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus had just spent the entire previous chapter (chapter 10)

warning His disciples that the world would harass, persecute, and even kill them.

Remember the 2nd last beatitude? **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Matthew 5:10

John’s imprisonment and subsequent death at the hands of violent men would not be an anomaly.

In fact, it too was a foreshadow of Jesus’ own suffering and death at the hands of violent men.

But it isn’t just the people of Jesus’ day who have such questions about what they see at the hands of violent or insolent or ungodly men, is it?

When we see or hear about Christian’s being persecuted, whether physically/verbally, or through the law, we can also wonder, or even begin to doubt, whether Jesus is really the right way.

Would God allow such difficulties to befall His people, who faithfully hold and confess His name?

Was John right to rebuke Herod the Tetrarch and Herodius for their illicit and ungodly marriage and so wind up in prison, ultimately beheaded?

Or should he have been “wiser” and kept his mouth shut?

Christians today might ask:

Am I right to defend God’s precious name when those around me are mocking their Savior, even though it might make them laugh at me, or jeopardize my status in the eyes?

After examining myself, am I right to speak to my friend/family member in love about a sin that he is living with and, because of impenitence, is separating himself from God and rejecting His mercy?

Did I act or speak correctly – was my heart in the right place – when I had that tough conversation that didn’t turn out the way I would have hoped?

Is this the right way? And don’t think that pastors don’t have these questions and fears also?

But here our Lord teaches us not to judge by sight or experience.

While we always recognize that our own sinful nature is with us,

and we ought always to approach such situations with fervent prayers for God in His grace to open ears and hearts, especially our own,

we are not to judge the rightness or wrongness based on the outcome.

Otherwise, we would have to deduce that John was wrong to admonish Herod...

and that Jesus was incorrect to call the Pharisees hypocrites, and to reprove the High Priest, which, worldly speaking, sealed His crucifixion and death.

Instead, Jesus teaches us to trust His word when He said, “**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**”

We do not walk by sight or experience. These are not the deciding basis for what is right or wrong.

Even when Jesus told John’s disciples to report back to John what they had seen and heard, it was really to point them to the Scriptures to see that it was being fulfilled by Jesus.

We walk by faith, by the word of the Lord, and trust His Word to be powerful and effective.

We look to Jesus, the one at whom John pointed and see in Him,

the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and gladly forgives those who seek His mercy and repent of their sins.

We look to Jesus who takes away your sin of fear of the possible consequences from worldly people.

We look to Jesus who takes away the guilt of your doubt and distrust of God’s Word...

and gives and strengthens your faith by that same word.

And we see Jesus, at the greatest event of all time – to which all the prophets and John pointed – and we hear Him cry, “**Father, forgive them,**” and “**It is finished.**”

And you know He purposefully died at the hands of evil men to forgive you & cleanse you of all sin, just as He has cleansed Jaxson today, and washed away all of his sins.

Jesus’ sacrificial death was important for John.

As bold and confident as he was in his preaching, as bold as he was in admonishing Herod, he was still human... still had fears, still had doubts, still needed his faith strengthened.

What a blessing it would be for his disciples to return and report all that they had seen and heard, which was just as Isaiah had foretold them.

What a comfort it would be for him to be confident that the Messiah, his Savior, was here, and had come to take away the sins of the world, and his sins also.

And “**Yet**” Jesus says, “**the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**”

This is not to encourage pride or to seek after greatness, especially not what the world considers greatness,

but to seek simply to hear with open ears and believe the simple word of God,
that Jesus has come to save sinners and so make you a great heir of the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God!

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria