

Beauty and the Beast

Mark 1: 4 – 11 (NLT)

This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had turned to God to receive forgiveness for their sins.⁵ All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.⁶ His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷ John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals.⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

⁹ One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.¹⁰ As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove.¹¹ And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy."

When I was in 2nd grade, I clearly remember going on a school trip to a play performed at Dordt College, which is about 20 miles away from my home town. It was the dress rehearsal, and they often invited surrounding schools to attend to give the cast an audience. As an eight year old, I remember it was great! The play was Beauty and the Beast, and I remember that I did not know anything about the play – but we were going to miss a half day of school, got to go on a field trip on a school bus and attend a play. It was definitely something that we were all anxious for... We arrived with several other schools, and our teacher, Mrs. Hasselmann lead us to the rows we were assigned to sit. We sat on the right side of the stage about 10 rows back, and it was very exciting.

This was way before the Disney movie and I have to admit was before VCR's, so even if the Disney movie was out, I likely would not have had an opportunity to see it. I think our teacher read the story to us in class prior, but even with that, I remember being a little lost as I watched the play. There was this really pretty girl, and she ended up living with this guy that looked like a lion and lived in a castle. He had a regular body and was dressed in long robes, but he looked like our high school mascot, a Lion with a large head and mane, and that was not beastly to me... In fact, at high school football games, we stood in line to shake hands with Papa Lion and we cheered when he came around. Papa Lion seemed to be a hero and certainly was not a beast. He gave hugs and high fives – he was cool! So as I watched the play the beast was never really a beast to me. The story showed that the pretty girl was very scared of him at first, and eventually fell in love with the beast, and he turned out to not be a beast at all, he turned out

to be a prince in a lion costume. And they all lived happily ever after. That just made sense to me – the lion was the good guy all along.

So – as I thought about John the Baptist, he was definitely wild and dressed roughly in a camel haired robe tied with a leather belt, wild hair and beard; he definitely fit the role of a beast, but his outside appearance was far from his true purpose. He was a cousin of Jesus in some manner, and was six months older. He lived in the wilderness and played the part well.

John, like Jesus, was an unlikely birth but for different reasons. According to Luke, his parents - Zechariah and Elizabeth, were getting on in their years, and did not have children because Elizabeth was barren. Zechariah was a priest and in Luke 1: 6, it said they were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations, so John was a great blessing to them.

As Dayna shared in her Advent series, Zechariah was one of the first visited by an Angel. Zechariah was told they would have a child – after they had long ago given up on having children, and in Luke 1:17, it said he will be a man with the spirit and the power of Elijah, the prophet of old, and that his son would precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival. This son had a very important role in the coming of our Lord; so much so that God needed an Angel to explain the plan to Zechariah.

What a great passage for us to transition out of the Christmas story and this is where Mark actually starts his gospel. Mark's gospel was the first one written, and he did not share the birth story of Jesus; Mark started with the baptism of Jesus – the next place where we actually pick up the story of Jesus. There is very little written about Jesus after his birth and the family fleeing to Egypt, so this is really the next logical place that the story of Jesus begins. You see – this is kind of Jesus's coming out party.

So – back to John - John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness and baptizing people in the Jordan River. He is becoming very popular and people are coming from all over Judea to hear John and be cleansed of their sins. But John knew his role and he keeps preaching that he is not the one to follow – there is one coming that is far greater than him – someone that will change the world, and in verse 9, one day Jesus showed up on the shore of the Jordan River – asking to be baptized. Now being related, I would have to guess that the two men knew each other, and John knew that Jesus was the one that he was talking about. In the passage, John did as he was asked – even though he had no sins to be cleansed, and as Jesus emerged from the Jordan, the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended on them. A voice from Heaven said – you are my beloved son, for whom I am well pleased. Could you even imagine – standing on the shore of the Jordan, watching this beastly prophet dunking people in the

Jordon River, and he does this to his cousin and the sky opens and a voice talks. Now that is something that you would not forget!

So – why is John’s lead in so important to Jesus’ ministry? What does it mean to the “big” picture?

First – John the Baptist was prophesized in the Old Testament. Let’s start with Isaiah. Isaiah 40:3 talks about someone shouting from the wilderness making a highway for the Lord. Someone who would fill the valleys and level the hills, someone who would straighten out the curves and smooth off the rough roads. This was written around 700 BC, which is hundreds of years before Jesus or John, but when we compare the details, it is remarkably accurate to what actually happened.

The strongest prophesy came at the very end of the Old Testament. It was at the end of Malachi and was written around 430 BC. Malachi 4: 5 – 6 says –

5 “Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives.**6** His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

This prophesy from Malachi was the last one documented for the next 400 years and fit perfectly with the coming of John the Baptist. It was definitely a very fitting place to start the gospel of Mark – since that was where we ended the Old Testament many years before.

Second reason John’s ministry was so important – John the Baptist was different. John knew his role and was very confident and comfortable in what he was doing and why he was doing it. John was noticed and John was remembered. He used his wild “beastly” appearance to raise attention, and he used the Jordon River to help followers see the importance of cleansing themselves of their sins. This was different from the Jewish traditions which said you could and should do a sacrifice; John used the Jordon River water to show the cleansing of your sins. This was a turning point and definitely set John apart from any previous prophets. He didn’t just talk repentance, he said that times were changing and he was just the beginning.

John was kind of like our modern day movie trailers. He was just a snapshot of what was to come and he definitely wetted our appetite for more. He made us anticipate the additional story and hunger for more. He brought attention without spoiling the rest of the story – he made us anxious for the future, the life and times of our Lord and Savior.

And finally – John was the announcer or herald of Jesus. In Dan Freiberg’s Sunday school class, we call our study Bibles with notes at the bottom of the page a “cheat” Bible because they give

us some of the “answers” and my “cheat” Bible shared that important Roman officials of this day were always preceded by an announcer or herald. There was no media, newspaper, 6:00 news or central bulletin board. They would send them ahead to make sure everyone knew they were coming. When the herald arrived in town, they made sure that people knew that someone of prominence would soon arrive. Since Mark’s audience was mainly Roman Christians, it was something they could really understand.

Someone to ensure everyone knew the importance. Someone to start changing our way of thinking and preparing us for the change that is coming. Kind of like the many politician’s that have finally left our state this week. They travel with an entourage and fanfare and always have someone introduce them. They don’t just walk up to the podium; they have rallies, and have other people talk, give speeches to endorse them and give credibility to what they are going to say. They build excitement and anticipation. That is exactly what John was called to do – introduce Jesus, hold rallies, and prepare the people for the one that was coming. Now – I am in NO way comparing Jesus to a politician, but more so the other way around. I think our politicians learned from Jesus’s example. That introduction is very important to ensure the message gets out. The message that the old ways were changing and a new future was coming.

Now – we have focused most of our time on the beast figure of the scripture this morning and the important role and call he had – but I do not want to miss out of the “beauty” of moment. This was a time stopping momentous event in the Bible. The heavens opened up and a voice spoke. Where else does that happen? God spoke directly at this event – saying “this is my beloved Son – for whom I am well pleased”. Could you imagine that? No politician in Iowa, Washington or even in Hollywood has been able to accomplish that! This is a beautiful moment that tells the world – Jesus is the one, the one that came to save us from our sins – rescue us from ourselves. This is an amazing sign from the heavens, a message for all of us.

That is why Mark started here. This was the beginning – God’s announcement to those on the shores of the Jordon and ultimately to all of us, this is MY SON – and I approve his message! Christmas is the start, but John the Baptist and this baptism was really the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and the start of our future. This was where the change in our faith began.

Our Lord and Savior walked this land like we do every day, he was baptized, he taught and he died for each of us. Our God wanted to make sure to give us every chance and introduction to the changes he was making. God cared so much that he sent the herald in the form of a Beast to share the Beauty of his grace and love. What a wonderful way to start 2012!

Amen