

“DOES ANYONE HEAR JOHN?”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, I Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 12 & 13, 2020

Chuck Swindoll tells this interesting account. He says, “My happiest preteen memories take me back to Mason Park swimming pool on the east side of Huston, Texas. Before I learned to swim on top of the water, I was diving into the deep end (which was against the rules) and swimming to the side, coming up for air next to the ladder.

“I shall never forget on one frightening occasion, diving in, swimming the wrong way and getting into the traffic of those diving from the high diving board. Gasping for air, I swallowed water, couldn’t scream for help and gagged. Teddy Muntz, the lifeguard on duty, dove into the pool, wrapped me in his big arms and saved me from danger and quite probably death. That day he was my savior and my rescuer.”¹

In our world today, there are many people who are drowning in their own lives. They have broken the rules of God and our society, have swum into the traffic of illegal and immoral activities and have found themselves gasping for life in the midst of this sinful world. They are perishing, yet many seem not to notice that fact. They keep on thrashing around in an attempt to live their lives as best they can based on their rules, all the while gagging on the consequences of their rebellion against God’s rules and commandments. They – no WE - are in need of someone to direct us to the Savior who will come to us and rescue us from certain death and destruction. For we have become deaf to the warnings of breaking God’s commands and have gone our own ways as fast and as furiously as we could. We are in need of someone to direct us into the hands of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We need someone who calls out to us to get our attention so that we might heed his call and find the salvation that we need.

On this third week of Advent, our Gospel lesson today tells us of one such man who calls us to take notice of our Savior. His name is John. Listen to these words of the Gospel of John 1:6-8, 19-28 (READ John 1:6-8, 19-28).

¹ (Charles Swindoll, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998] pg. 487)

Who does the world need right now? “Do we need a philosopher like Socrates? A military genius like Alexander the Great? A brain like Albert Einstein? A statesman like Abraham Lincoln? A theologian like Karl Barth? How about Jesus? No, **the one that the world needs most right now is John the Baptist.**”²

Yes, Jesus has come as our Savior. Yes, Jesus came to save the world from eternal death and destruction. But what our world needs right now is one who once more gets the world ready to accept Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah sent from God, the Savior of the world. We need John the Baptist, because had Jesus come to the earth without John preparing the world for Him, the people would not have accepted Him, or even believed in Him as the Messiah. They would not have received Him as the One who comes to take away the sins of the world. John is right here in the middle of the Advent Season for us, calling all of us to take heed of Jesus, so that we might be rescued by Him from the dangers of drowning in our sin.

The world needed someone to prepare the way for Jesus to come, so God provided John. “*God sent His messenger, a man named John...*” (John 1:6-7). John knew what his purpose was as the herald of Christ, but folks around him didn’t understand. They asked who he was, and he honestly replied that he was not the Christ; nor was he Elijah; neither was he the Prophet. He “*came to tell people about the Light, so that all should hear the message and believe*” (1:7).

The people didn’t understand, so they asked him, “*Who are you?*” And John’s answer was straight out of Isaiah 40:3, “**I am ‘the voice** of someone shouting in the desert: Make a straight path for the Lord to travel!” His was the voice causing people to realize their need for a Savior. Before you come to need a Savior, you must first realize that there is a problem. John opened the eyes and hearts of the people to understand that their sin was causing a separation between them and God. In order to come back into a relationship with God again, the people had to be convicted of the sin in their lives. John was by the Jordan River, calling out the sins of the day, and convicting the people of their own sins

² (John R. Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, [Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing, 1975] pg. 30-31)

so that they could confess them and get right with God once more. John was the one who pointed the finger of conviction at the people and called out their sinfulness. So he was an uncomfortable figure that unsettled people as he boldly exposed the evil and wrongs of the day. Even his demeanor was unsettling, wearing crude clothing and eating a very questionable diet. But he lived in stark reality to the luxury and laxity of the day out of protest to what was expected as the normal for the day. “In fiery, frank, and forceful language he condemned the sin of the day and called people to turn from their wickedness. He threatened them with the damnation of hell-fire. He said that the axe was at the trunk of the tree and every evil tree would be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

“You know, we need a John the Baptist for these years. Paradoxically we are living in the most sin-saturated society with the least consciousness of our sin...Sin is no longer sin to modern man. There is sin, of course, but we call it a disease or a crime. Maybe it is a neurosis or a social maladjustment.”³

Instead of calling sin a sin, we go about three things to deal with it. We accept it as if it were normal for our lives. We tell ourselves, “Oh it’s not that bad!” We refuse to deal with it, and we make it just another part of our society, demanding that everyone welcome it and accept it, too. We surround ourselves with it through the media so that it is just something that happens to us as humans. Everybody is doing it so what makes it wrong? We teach it as if it’s just the way things are. In fact, our society has so normalized sin that life would be rather dull to us without us seeing it on TV programs or hearing about it on the news, or watching it in the movies. We normalize it so much that we become so unconcerned about sinning. We say to ourselves, “It’s only human to sin,” and we rationalize it as something that just happens to us.

So we expect sin to happen, making it a commonplace event in our lives. And when we get caught breaking the law, we get more upset because we got caught than we do about our actually breaking the law. In fact, instead of realizing that it is sin, and calling it that, what we do is go about trying to control it, rather than dealing with it. We legalize our sins, so that they aren’t sins any more,

³ (John Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, pg. 32)

but just common parts of our life. When gambling became a problem, we legalized it and made it into a money-making activity. When so many people were being arrested for smoking marijuana, we legalized the use of it so that our jails weren't full of law-breaking pot-smokers. When cohabitation before marriage became rampant, we made allowance for "companions" to share in life insurance policies and allowed common-law marriage after being together for 7 years. There's even been a movement in several states to work on legalizing prostitution. Right now in California, strip clubs are allowed to have as many people in them as they want, yet there are restrictions on how many people can be in restaurants or even in churches at a time. We turn our backs to destructive protest and demonstrations, allowing militants to boldly destroy public property and loot and rob businesses with little to no consequences for the masses. We say that people have a right to voice their complaints and grudges. We flaunt drunkenness as just something that happens, while bars and liquor stores rake in millions of dollars. We are surrounded by sinfulness, and yet instead of dealing with it appropriately, calling it out, we legalize it.

And if we aren't accepting sin as a legitimate part of our lives, we deny it. We actually go on record saying that we have done nothing wrong. We deny our sin so much that we don't even realize that it is in our lives. There are so many people that feel there is nothing wrong with their lives, yet everything in their life, their family, and their career is being turned up-side-down because of it. People in Congress say and do things that are blatantly against our Constitution, yet they deny that it's wrong. Again, until they get caught, there's nothing wrong.

But we kid ourselves if we say we have no sin. God knows how sinful we are, giving Paul the words to write to the Romans, "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the kingdom of God*" (Romans 3:23). We deceive ourselves when we say we have no sin, yet those all around us can see it clearly.

If we do not accept sin as normal, if we do not deny that we sin, then we try to hide it. This has plagued us from the beginning of humanity. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command (sin) and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their first response was to try to hide it from God. They immediately knew that they had done wrong, so they made clothing from leaves to hide

themselves, and they even hid from God, Himself, even after He called out to them.

And King David tried to hide his adultery with Bathsheba by first trying to get Uriah, her husband, to be with her so that he could claim the baby as rightfully in the family. But when Uriah didn't do as David expected, David contrived a nice neat plan of having Uriah killed in battle so that David could take Bathsheba as his wife. The people didn't know, but God did. The sin was exposed when God instructed Nathan the prophet to go and confront David with the evil that he had done. When we do wrong, we also try to cover our tracks, we do our best to erase our footprints and fingerprints from the scene. Rather than admit that we have sinned we try our best to hide it and make believe that we have not sinned. However, the truth will always be found out, the sin will always become exposed, if not to the rest of us, before God.

We need the man John the Baptist, because he confronts us with the reality of sin in our life. He calls us to do the only thing that is right and good with regard to sin – REPENT! He exposes the corruption, he calls out the wrong doing, and he proclaims the injustice in order to get a person to acknowledge their sin and have them turn away from that sin. He calls US to become so overwhelmed with the sin in our life that we call out to God, "*Have mercy upon me, a sinner!*" (Psalm 51). And only when we repent from our sin can we find the forgiveness that God offers.

Now, repentance is doing an about-face with our lives. Everyone trained in the military knows that an about-face means turning 180 degrees in the direction we were facing. We change our direction from one way, to go a completely different way. Repentance is turning away from sin and turning instead toward God, following His ways and coming into compliance with His commands. So we turn from evil to goodness, from Satan to God, from wrong to right, from ourselves to Christ. This involves a total change in the way that we live, the way that we think, the way that we speak, and the way that we treat others. But it cannot be just a once-and-done deal, because we are constantly sinning. We have to constantly be vigilant in acknowledging our sinful ways, daily turning back to God's ways.

It is the voice of John the Baptist that we need to hear today so that the world might confess their

sins and find redemption and forgiveness. But it also needs more than a voice calling out sin; the world needs **a finger pointing to God's remedy to sin**. John is that man, pointing us to Jesus Christ as the only way to find freedom from sin. John's baptism was that of repentance, but the baptism of Jesus is with the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power and ability to turn from sin and follow Jesus. John pointed to Jesus and told the people, *"There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world! This is the One I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me, but He is greater than I am, because He existed before I was born.' I did not know who He would be, but I came baptizing with water in order to make Him known to the people of Israel"* (John 1:29-31). John came to prepare the world for Jesus to give us the Holy Spirit so that we could live according to all of the commands of God as we follow Jesus.

But we have silenced the voice of John and have ignored his pointing us to Jesus. Instead, we have tried to make people good by our own standards, using various techniques or venues in an attempt to improve or rectify our sin problem. We have tried to eliminate sin by drugs or imprisonment. We have attempted to change the actions of people through behavior modification. We have tried to use education to make people decent. We have attempted to pass restrictive laws that curtail certain activities that we hoped to stop sin. We thought that by improving housing it would decrease sin. We attempted to curb sin by enacting civil rights legislation. But none of them worked.

Today, politicians are pushing equal rights as a way to eradicate sin. Others resort to demonstrations and riots to make changes in sin. Some say that we need to change our society to become a socialist nation, and that will surely eliminate sin. Others focus on correcting the air quality as an attempt to correct people through the Green New Deal and the Clean Air Act. None of these will bring us to the point of reducing or eliminating sin. On the contrary, everything we do on our own as humans brings us further away from God's ways, and encourages us to either accept sin as normal, deny that sin is happening, or trying to hide sin altogether. "It is like the man praying to God every Wednesday night at a prayer meeting that God would take the cobwebs of sin from his life. One man

got tired of hearing the same prayer week after week. He interrupted the prayer to say, ‘Don’t do it, Lord. Don’t do it! Don’t clear out the cobwebs, kill the spider!’⁴

Today we need John the Baptist more than ever pointing us to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only solution to our sin problem. John is the finger pointing us to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Since all sin is done against God, He had to make a way for us to get rid of that sin, and He did it through Jesus of Nazareth on that first Christmas night. Jesus, the Son of God, took on our likeness, became a man completely like us, yet without sin. He took our sins upon Himself and then died upon the cross so that He might pay the price for that sin and free us from the bondage to sin and death. His perfect sacrifice on the cross was the only way for us to rid sin from our lives, as we confess Him as our Savior. Only a perfect sacrifice could pay for the sins of the world.

Christmas is the celebration of Jesus coming to earth as the fulfillment of God’s promise of One who would take away the sins of all people. It was the angel that told the shepherds, “*This very day in David’s town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord!*” (Luke 2:11). Jesus, God’s only Son, the Perfect Sacrifice, the Lamb of God, was born here on earth as a human, in order to die for us for the forgiveness of our sins. The cradle and the cross are two sides of the same coin, making eternal payment for the penalty of sin. That’s the way that God designed it! That is God’s perfect plan of Salvation for everyone suffering from sin. The great Good News for us is that Jesus Christ did die for our sins, and He opened up the road for repentant sinners to return to God and find acceptance, forgiveness, and love. God has made a way for us to find a full, free life in Christ Jesus. That is the great Good News that the angels proclaimed and what John the Baptist pointed to.

So if this is the Good News for all humanity, why are we still struggling with sin in this world? Why does it seem that there is more sin than ever when the way to forgiveness and freedom is already provided for us through Jesus Christ? If what the Bible says is true, why are people still struggling with guilt and have so little happiness in their lives? Why isn’t Jesus making a bigger difference in our

⁴ (John R. Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, pg. 36)

world? Could it be that we are ignoring the voice of the One calling us to repent? Could it be that we are somehow missing the direction that points us to the One who can save us from our sin?

What the world needs today is John the Baptist, to witness to the people the reality of Jesus Christ as our Savior. And this has come to those who follow Jesus as a privilege and responsibility. Christians are to be the light of Christ in the world, fulfilling John the Baptist's role as the voice of one calling in the desert, and the finger of one pointing the way to Jesus. We are to be living witnesses to the salvation of Jesus. Apparently, we are failing in giving an accurate witness of the forgiveness found only in Jesus.

As a result, denominations are losing members by the thousands each year. Because the church is not fulfilling its call to be the witness of Jesus Christ, to be modern day John the Baptists, it is in danger of becoming irrelevant for our society. Yet, every Christian is summoned to be the evangelist to their neighbor so that they can see the need to repent and seek out Jesus Christ.

So the best way for us to witness to others is through the quality of our everyday life. A true Christian is a sermon without words. Anglican Bishop John Selwyn, served in Melanesia (Island region northeast of Australia) as a missionary for 18 years (1873 – 1891). At one time he found it “necessary to rebuke a candidate for baptism in Melanesia. The candidate violently slapped the bishop on the face. Though the bishop was bigger and heavier than the candidate, the Bishop just crossed his arms and waited to see if he would be struck again. This unnerved the attacker and he ran off. Years later the Bishop returned to England. The same native came to another missionary for baptism. When he was asked in what name he wanted to be baptized, he replied, ‘Call me John Selwyn, for it was he who first taught me what Christ is like.’”⁵ Oh, that we might do the same with our lives?

The world desperately needs John the Baptist today, confronting us with our sins, calling us to repent, and directing us to Jesus. May we step in to finish the work he started, so that we might draw others to Jesus, too. That is our purpose during Advent, to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Amen!

⁵ (John R. Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, pg. 37)