

God's Reconciled Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

December 10 & 11, 2016

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Malachi 4: 5-6 (CEB)

- ⁵Look, I am sending
Elijah the prophet to you,
before the great and terrifying
day of the LORD arrives.
- ⁶Turn the hearts of the parents
to the children
and the hearts of the children
to their parents.
Otherwise, I will come and
strike the land with a curse.

Matthew 3:1-12 (CEB)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ²“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” ³He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting
in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”*

⁴John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁵People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. ⁶As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹²The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

God’s pursuit of his people has come to this.

*One man, John, proclaims that God would now step onto the stage
in a way that no one had ever imagined. And the world would be forever changed.*

I hated diagramming sentences. Do students even still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted vines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Uggh. . . . But I wish I had paid more attention to it. Grammar matters. Vocabulary and grammar are the basic tools of communication. Grammar is how we say exactly what we mean.

Take verb tenses for example. Variously, Paul writes that we “have been saved” (Eph. 2:8), “we are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18), and “we shall be saved” (Rom. 5:9). So which is it? Is Paul just being sloppy with his grammar or even his thinking?

Few would so bold as to refer to Paul as “sloppy” about anything. He was an intellectual powerhouse and his writings collected for us in the New Testament are God-breathed

Scripture. He meant exactly what he said. So, as faithful readers of God's Word we pay attention to the grammar, including the verb tenses. Every bit of it matters very much.

A moment of past, present, and future

The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke words of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if the prophets were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah *will* change the world. God *will* abide with his people as he never had before and all *will* be right.

And so this week we come to the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, i.e., baptizing them. The Christian proclamation is that the long-awaited Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God's profound and humbling incarnation.

John is the prophet who announces that this Day of the Lord is fast upon God's people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived. What had been future would now be present.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John's words drifted. The text box on Israel and Rome may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who had come to reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

But John's message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present

Israel and Rome

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus' birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such as Pontius Pilate. In Jesus' day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman lords. Rome wasn't troubled by the Jews' peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God's kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt that the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews. In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few. The Roman governors were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and greedy actions. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury . . . all in all, hardly a time of peace.

with his people, as God had once been, long before. But for a time, so short a time, God would now walk among his people in the flesh. He would teach and love and heal, calling God's people to return to the way of God, for it was time for the whole world to be reconciled to God.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day. Another way to say this is simply to proclaim that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God; i.e. God's wondrous future.

The kingdom arrives

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom was not just a promised future but also a present reality.

A new day

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week.

But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life. In this season, may we abide with others as God abides with us.

A few keys for reading Matthew

Because of this gospel's "Jewishness," when you are reading Matthew, always bear in mind Israel's story – the creation, the fall, the calling out of Abraham and the promise of a great nation through whom the world would be blessed, the deliverance from Egypt, Moses and the Law, the idealized King David, and the continual inability of Israel to live up to her end of the covenant with God. Matthew proclaims that Israel's story reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In all likelihood, Matthew had the gospel of Mark available to him when writing his own account of Jesus. Using Mark's action-oriented narrative as the basic structure for his own gospel, Matthew added a beginning (the genealogy and birth story), an ending (the resurrection account), and inserted five blocks of Jesus' teachings. By inserting so much of Jesus' teaching, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority as a teacher and the training of his new community in what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus not only teaches his disciples how they are to live in relationship with one another, but even how the community is to discipline itself.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John's vocation was to announce the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God (see John 1). The arrival of the Messiah also meant the arrival of God's kingdom, for the Messiah was the Anointed One who would usher in the new age. What do you think is meant by the arrival of God's kingdom? What is God's kingdom like? Given all the trouble and tragedy and pain in our world, does it even make sense to claim that Jesus ushered in God's kingdom?
2. I suspect that most of us don't usually link together baptism and the Christmas season. But baptism is a rebirth, an act of new creation. It is a crossing into the Promised Land, God's kingdom, which ought to point us to the coming of Jesus Christ. What does your own baptism mean to you? Or the baptism of your children? What do you think John means when he says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit? How could we incorporate our baptisms into the Christmas season?
3. What specific steps can you take to prepare yourself and your loved ones for the coming of the Christ-child? This is bigger than putting the "Christ" back in Christmas or however we are used to thinking of it. The question is how do we prepare ourselves for the coming salvation, for the reconciling of God and his creation.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Isaiah 11:1-10 The peaceful kingdom, the Kingdom of God

Tuesday, Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 The full story of John's birth

Wednesday, John 1:10-34 John the Baptizer's testimony about Jesus

Thursday, Exodus 12 The imagery of Jesus as the Lamb of God is taken from the story of the Exodus.

Friday, Matthew 3:13-17 John baptizes Jesus.

Saturday, Mark 6:14-29 Herod's execution of John the Baptizer.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The Current Series: *Our Family Tree*

The story of Christianity and its denominations

This week: We celebrate with our class Christmas potluck

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org