

An End and a Beginning—John the Baptist

Thomas Robinson, *Behold Your King 5*, December 30, 2018

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days, **John the Baptist** comes proclaiming in the **wilderness** of **Judea**, ² saying, **“Change your way of thinking** (repent), **for the kingdom of the heavens** has come near.”

³ For he is the one spoken of through **Isaiah** the prophet when he said,

*“A **voice** of one shouting out: ‘In the **wilderness***

*prepare **the way of the LORD**; make his **paths** straight.’”* [Isa. 40:3]

⁴ Now John himself used to have his clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist [2Kg 1:7-8], and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵ At that time **Jerusalem** used to go out to him as well as all of **Judea** and all the country around the Jordan, ⁶ and they were being **plunged** (baptized) in the **Jordan** river by him, as they **confessed their sins**.

⁷ But when he saw many of the **Pharisees** and **Sadducees** coming to his baptism, he said to them, **“Brood of vipers!** Who showed you how to flee from the coming wrath?

⁸ Therefore, **produce fruit worthy of a real change of thinking** (repentance). ⁹ And don't suppose that you can tell yourselves, ‘We have **Abraham** as **father**,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

¹⁰ But even now the **axe lies right at the root of the trees**. Every tree therefore that doesn't bear beautiful fruit is being cut off and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ I for my part am plunging (baptizing) you in **water** aiming toward a **change of heart** (repentance), but the one who is coming after me is **stronger than I am!** For him, I'm not capable even to carry his sandals. He himself will plunge (baptize) you in **Holy Spirit** and **fire**. ¹² His shovel for sifting wheat is ready in his hand, and he'll cleanse his threshing floor and **gather his grain** into the barn, but the straw he'll burn with a fire you can't put out.”

Matthew 4:17 *Like John, Jesus proclaims repentance and the arrival of God's kingdom.*

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim and to say, “Change your way of thinking (repent), for the kingdom of the heavens has come near.”

Isaiah 40: 3-5 *Isaiah anticipates the coming of God to his people.*

³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; | make straight in the desert a highway for our God. | ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, | and every mountain and hill be made low; | the uneven ground shall become level | and the rough places a plain. | ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, | and all flesh shall see it together, | for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

2 Kings 1:7-8 *Elijah's was known by his distinctive dress.*

⁷ Ahaziah said to them, “What kind of man ... told you these things?” ⁸ They answered, “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”

Malachi 4:5 *Malachi anticipates the return of Elijah.*

⁵ “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”

Matthew 6:9 *Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for the coming of God's kingdom.*

⁹ Pray then in this way: “Our Father in the heavens, may your name be made holy. ¹⁰ May your kingdom come, may your will be done, as in heaven so also on earth....”

Matthew 12:28 *Jesus describes God's kingdom's presence already in his ministry.*

(Jesus said,) ²⁸ But if by God's Spirit, I myself am casting out the demons, then the kingdom of God has already overtaken you!

Matthew 28:18-20 *After his resurrection Jesus sends out disciples based on his authority as King.*

¹⁸ And when Jesus came near, he spoke with them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing (plunging) them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. Know that I am with you every day, to the consummation of the age."

Daniel 9:4-5 *Daniel in exile prays confessing the sins of God's people.*

(Daniel said,) ⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, ... ⁵ we have sinned and done wrong ... and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments."

John the Baptizer and Elijah

Matthew introduces John as a known person: "Baptizer" (also Josephus). Famous as prophet and martyr killed by Herod Antipas. He is the renewal of prophecy cut short by corrupt power.

Mt illuminates his role by two scripture references. Isaiah 40: Wilderness, Exodus, hope for end of exile, renewal. Preparation for God. This is what the Gospel is about. Nothing less.

Also the sign of Elijah that ends Malachi. The call for renewal before God's Judgment.

The surprising way that God comes. "God with us" as the exiled son. God as human Messiah.

God's Kingdom Breaks In – Learning to Think in New Ways

John proclaims a call for repentance (*metanoein*) and the arrival of God's Kingdom: the heavens are the realm of God everywhere. Repentance is more than personal sorrow for individual sins. It is realization that God's people have fundamentally turned away from God as God. The people are plunged, confessing that rebellion and brokenness, like Daniel.

John, like Jesus, doesn't try to convince them that God's kingdom is coming. It is here, beginning to break in. He is telling them/helping them see what to do to get to participate in it.

Matthew's Gospel – the Gospel – is announcement not defense or argument.

Pharisees and Sadducees – What is a Brood of Vipers?

John's reaction to these leaders is startling! Pharisees are the great expounders of the Law.

Sadducees are the leading priests and keepers of the Temple. John (like the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls) sees them not as forces for renewal but expressions of Israel's problem.

John anticipates Jesus' critique: Abraham as father (Mt 1:1). Confidence in ethnic identity and careful legal purity boundaries, blocks them from real change of thinking that can make them open to the in-breaking of God's kingdom in unexpected ways, among sinners, Gentiles. Purity and Temple are not the fruit of a new way of thinking. The axe of judgment is ready.

The Beginning of a Time of Spirit and Fire

Matthew describes John anticipating Jesus. John is a recognizable prophet of the long story.

Jesus will connect with John's baptism in water, but the power of Jesus' work will be plunging people into Spirit and Fire. This will open to them God's rule and reveal who they are not by external signs but deep transformation that creates a new way of life (SoM).

God is with us in ways that challenge all expectations. In the very things that seem to deny Jesus as Messiah – reinterpretation of Law, rejection of Temple, welcome to sinners / outsiders, death – God is judging old ways and plunging people into Spirit and Fire. The Kingdom!