

"WHO CARES ABOUT YOUR GENEALOGY?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 9, 1984

## "WHO CARES ABOUT YOUR GENEALOGY?"

### INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you've ever known a John the Baptist? John the Baptist is somebody who brings you up short, who punctures your pretensions, and reminds you who you really are. Maybe it's someone who remembers you from way back...who reminds you of your humble origins and won't let you pretend to be somebody else. That's John the Baptist.

Preachers run into John the Baptist. It's very easy for preachers to forget that they are mere human beings. People like to put them up on pedestals. They want them to be different; address them with a title, pay deference to them, say nice things about their dull sermons. And after a while you begin to believe all that stuff. Then along comes a John the Baptist.

I have a friend who was a guest preacher at another Church last Winter. After the service was over he was greeting people at the coffee hour and everyone was being polite and gracious to him...saying nice things to him. And he was basking in all that warmth until a man came up to him and said, "That was just about the lousiest sermon I've ever heard." He then turned around and walked away. After a while the same man came back and this time he said to the guest preacher, "It was hackneyed and trite"...and walked away. Pretty soon the man came back for a third time and said, "Besides, the delivery was terrible...I had trouble hearing you". A woman standing near by said to the preacher, "Don't pay any attention to him. He's a notorious gossip. He just goes around repeating what everybody else says."

### DEVELOPMENT

Well, that's John the Baptist. He's part of the Advent landscape. He's the person who punctures your pretences. Have you ever met a John the Baptist? Chances are you have. We all have. Some people pick up and move some place else because of John the Baptist. This may be part of the reason some people leave the small town and come up to the city. It's hard to make something of yourself in a small town where people remember when you grew up. They knew you then and they won't let you forget that.

Back when I was first starting out in the ministry I was invite to preach a sermon in my home Church upstate. I had just completed seminary and I was some what nervous and wanted to do well...make a good impression. The pastor of the Church reassured me during the hymn just before the sermon. He leaned over and said something like this, "Phil...don't be nervous. All these people are your friends. They've known you for years...watched you grow up...and they're really not expecting very much."

There's an old saying, "A prophet is without honor in his own country". They knew him there, that's why. Jesus used that saying about Himself at Nazareth. He preached His first sermon there, in Nazareth, his hometown. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son? Who does He think He is?" A prophet is without honor in his own country because they know him there. They may cheer us on, but there's apt to be one or two who scoff and fail to take us seriously. "I knew him back when..." That's a John the Baptist. And he won't let you pretend to be anything other than who you really are.

I'll tell you this, I'd rather be a John the Baptist than to meet up with one. There's little fun in being confronted by one. Especially the real one, the first one. His job was to prepare the way for the Messiah. His method

was to strip people of their pretensions, to make them honest, to get them to confess who they really were. His job was to get them to be humble - because, you see, God can't come to you in any other way.

#### JOHN THE BAPTIST

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John is described in detail because Matthew wants you to identify him with somebody else. The description that is given of John is the description that is given of Elijah, the Prophet, in Second Kings. Matthew is saying that John is Elijah, because Elijah, it was believed, would come just before the Messiah. He'd be the precursor of the Messiah. So John is Elijah. He even dresses like him. That's so that you don't miss the point. John is Elijah. Elijah's mission in his day was to shake things up. One day Elijah ran into King Ahab. King Ahab sees Elijah coming down the road. He says, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah, the Prophet, is a troubler. Now get this point. So the way of the Messiah is prepared by Elijah, the troubler.

And that's how we are to understand the mission of John the Baptist, what his mission was about, what he was here for. He's Elijah - preparing the Way for the Messiah...troubling, shaking things up, stepping on toes here and there.

In one particular scene John is busy baptizing folk in the River Jordan, getting them ready for the coming of the Messiah, the new day. Crowds are all around him. John was very popular, really a "folk-hero" in his day. The Messiah was so desperately longed for and John was so genuinely honest as a man that he was accepted by thousands of people in his day as the forerunner of the Messiah - as Elijah. Some, in fact, even thought that John himself might be the Messiah, but he denied it and disclaimed the title. He said he was not the Messiah. He said, "I am Elijah, the one who prepares the way for the Messiah".

Now in this scene at the Jordan River are some Sadducees and Pharisees, members of the two prominent religious parties of the day. Religious celebrities, you might say. A bit of a feather in John's cap, as any evangelist knows, to have the celebrities come out and bless your meeting with their presence. That means the crowds will certainly follow. It's a compliment to John, but he's not at all impressed. He says to them, "You brood of vipers..." He turns them away with words like that and he won't baptize them because they won't repent. They believe they don't have to. They're respectable people. They are proud to be members of the covenant that God made long ago with Abraham. That's what they say.

So John shakes them up. He aims directly at their pride. He says, "Do not presume to say to yourself, 'We have Abraham as our Father'". That is, don't hide in your genealogy - or your status, or your rank, or your address, or your prestige. Who cares about all that stuff. Who cares about your ancestors?

God can raise out of these very stones children of Abraham. You had nothing to do with it anyway. Your being chosen was an act of grace - it was a gift. And what's more, you inherited it. So who cares about your genealogy? What matters are is your deeds. Your performance. So bear some fruit that befits repentance. That's the text and it says this. John the Baptist is a troubling preparation for Christmas - for all of us.

WHY IS HE THERE? Why is he there? He's there to make us humble, so we will see God when He comes into our world. That's why he's there.

There's an old Rabbinic tale about a man asking why no one can see God anymore. He said in the old days people saw God, the Scriptures reveal that. People saw God. Why can't they see Him anymore? And the wise man answered, because today no one can stoop low enough. You see, He came in a manger, not in a mansion. He came quietly, unannounced - not with a loud fanfare. He came humbly. And what John the Baptist is saying is you won't see Him unless you humble yourself. "Don't presume to say to yourself, 'Ah, but we have Abraham as our father'" It won't do any good. That won't get you a reserved place at the stable. That won't give you a box seat next to the manger. In fact, it gets in the way. The proud won't see Him, John is saying. Pride gets in the way.

John and all the rest of the Prophets in the Bible say, that's our problem. Pride is our problem. Pride is what separates us from God. But they define pride differently than we do. That's why it's so difficult to understand what the Bible is saying. We define pride as a good thing, an asset. We see pride as having a good self-image, and that's good. Nothing wrong with that. But in the Bible pride is defined differently.

Pride in the Bible is presumption, pretending to be something other than who you really are. That's why Jesus condemned the man who thanks God that he wasn't like other people. Because he was like other people. He was hiding behind his piety, his religion, using his religion to be somebody. God can't get to you if you do that. That's why it's condemned. Pride in the Bible is using rank, status, title, race, religion, grades, success, good looks, fancy car, fancy clothing - whatever - to pretend that you don't need anything outside of yourself. Don't presume to say "we have Abraham as our father...we don't need to repent". We don't need to humble ourselves. Pride is hiding your self behind a facade. In the case of the Pharisees, it was a facade of religion, but in our case it may be something else. It gets in the way. That's why it's wrong...

There's nothing in the Bible against having a good self-image. In fact, having a good self-image is assumed in the Bible. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself". It's just assumed...taken for granted that you will have a good self-image. And Paul writes to the Philippians, "Count other people better than yourselves". That's not advice intended to put yourself down; that's advice for you to lift others up...to treat them with dignity, to count them as good as yourself. All the advice in the Bible, in fact, on how to deal with others assumes that you think well of yourself. It says to treat other people the same way.

So, thinking well of yourself is not condemned, that's not what the Bible means by pride. What the Bible means by pride is presumption, pretending that you are something other than who you really are. And the antidote for pride is humility, and humility is honesty, and honesty about yourself is not humiliation, but it is freedom. It is freedom.

In his play, "The Elder Statesman", T. S. Eliot has a character say,

"What do I call failure? The worst kind of failure, in my opinion, is the man who has to keep on pretending to himself that he is a success. The man who has to, when he gets up in the morning, make up his face before he can look in the mirror."

I don't know what that man's problem is, whether he's got a bad self-image or whether he's just vain, naturally proud. It doesn't matter. As far as John is concerned, it doesn't matter one bit. The only thing that matters is that he's hiding. He's pretending to be somebody he isn't. And God can't get to you when you do that. The only way that God can come to you is for you to be who you really are. And in Biblical language, that's called humility. Stop pretending. And it leads not to humiliation or to defeat as we fear, but rather it leads to freedom - the ability to accept yourself as you really are because you know now that God loves you just the way you are.

PRECEDED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST And God's coming into the world was preceded by John the Baptist to show us that those events that shake us up and disturb us, that strip us of our dignity, that humble us, that tear off our masks, all of those events that we hate so much are John the Baptist events. And the good of them may be that they will prepare us for understanding who and what Jesus was and is.

C. S. Lewis once put it this way:

"Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in dismay. And it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through the dismay."

And that's the clue, the key for understanding this scene from the Gospel of St. Matthew. The Pharisees and the Sadducees came to John wanting to enter the Kingdom, into that unspeakable comfort, by just flashing their credentials. John says, it's not that easy. Don't presume that you can simply sashay into the Kingdom of God flashing your credentials. You won't get there that way. You get there by humility.

So when something happens to you, something that knocks you off your pins and humbles you and embarrasses you, leads you even to dismay - whatever - then look up. Get ready. It may be a John the Baptist event, sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of His life and His glory.

PRAYER: Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then - powerful to heal, to speak, to save. Think of Him as He is now, powerful as the Spirit of God among us....to lift us up out of the low places and to set our feet once again on the High way. O God, draw us to Him who is the perfect incarnation of Thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of his great love for all mankind. Amen.

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In one particular scene John is busy baptizing folk in the River Jordan, getting them ready for the coming of the Messiah, the new day. Crowds are all around him. John was very popular, really a "folk-hero" in his day. The Messiah was so desperately longed for and John was so genuinely honest as a man that he was accepted by thousands of people in his day as the forerunner of the Messiah - as Elijah. Some, in fact, even thought that John himself might be the Messiah, but he denied it and disclaimed the title. He said he was not the Messiah. He said, "I am Elijah, the one who prepares the way for the Messiah".

Now in this scene at the Jordan River are some Sadducees and Pharisees, members of the two prominent religious parties of the day. Religious celebrities, you might say. A bit of a feather in John's cap, as any evangelist knows, to have the celebrities come out and bless your meeting with their presence. That means the crowds will certainly follow. It's a compliment to John, but he's not at all impressed. He says to them, "You brood of vipers..." He turns them away with words like that and he won't baptize them because they won't repent. They believe they don't have to. They're respectable people. They are proud to be members of the covenant that God made long ago with Abraham. That's what they say.

So John shakes them up. He aims directly at their pride. He says, "Do not presume to say to yourself, 'We have Abraham as our Father!'. That is, don't hide in your genealogy - or your status, or your rank, or your address, or your prestige. Who cares about all that stuff. Who cares about your ancestors?"

God can raise out of these very stones children of Abraham. You had nothing to do with it anyway. Your being chosen was an act of grace - it was a gift. And what's more, you inherited it. So who cares about your genealogy? What matters are is your deeds. Your performance. So bear some fruit that befits repentance. That's the text and it says this. John the Baptist is a troubling preparation for Christmas - for all of us.

WHY IS HE THERE? Why is he there? He's there to make us humble, so we will see God when He comes into our world. That's why he's there.

There's an old Rabbinic tale about a man asking why no one can see God anymore. He said in the old days people saw God, the Scriptures reveal that. People saw God. Why can't they see Him anymore? And the wise man answered, because today no one can stoop low enough. You see, He came in a manger, not in a mansion. He came quietly, unannounced - not with a loud fanfare. He came humbly. And what John the Baptist is saying is you won't see Him unless you humble yourself. "Don't presume to say to yourself, 'Ah, but we have Abraham as our father'" It won't do any good. That won't get you a reserved place at the stable. That won't give you a box seat next to the manger. In fact, it gets in the way. The proud won't see Him, John is saying. Pride gets in the way.

John and all the rest of the Prophets in the Bible say, that's our problem. Pride is our problem. Pride is what separates us from God. But they define pride differently than we do. That's why it's so difficult to understand what the Bible is saying. We define pride as a good thing, an asset. We see pride as having a good self-image, and that's good. Nothing wrong with that. But in the Bible pride is defined differently.

Pride in the Bible is presumption, pretending to be something other than who you really are. That's why Jesus condemned the man who thanks God that he wasn't like other people. Because he was like other people. He was hiding behind his piety, his religion, using his religion to be somebody. God can't get to you if you do that. That's why it's condemned. Pride in the Bible is using rank, status, title, race, religion, grades, success, good looks, fancy car, fancy clothing - whatever - to pretend that you don't need anything outside of yourself. Don't presume to say "we have Abraham as our father...we don't need to repent". We don't need to humble ourselves. Pride is hiding your self behind a facade. In the case of the Pharisees, it was a facade of religion, but in our case it may be something else. It gets in the way. That's why it's wrong...

There's nothing in the Bible against having a good self-image. In fact, having a good self-image is assumed in the Bible. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself". It's just assumed...taken for granted that you will have a good self-image. And Paul writes to the Philippians, "Count other people better than yourselves". That's not advice intended to put yourself down; that's advice for you to lift others up...to treat them with dignity, to count them as good as yourself. All the advice in the Bible, in fact, on how to deal with others assumes that you think well of yourself. It says to treat other people the same way.

So, thinking well of yourself is not condemned, that's not what the Bible means by pride. What the Bible means by pride is presumption, pretending that you are something other than who you really are. And the antidote for pride is humility, and humility is honesty, and honesty about yourself is not humiliation, but it is freedom. It is freedom.

In his play, "The Elder Statesman", T. S. Eliot has a character say,

"What do I call failure? The worst kind of failure, in my opinion, is the man who has to keep on pretending to himself that he is a success. The man who has to, when he gets up in the morning, make up his face before he can look in the mirror."

I don't know what that man's problem is, whether he's got a bad self-image or whether he's just vain, naturally proud. It doesn't matter. As far as John is concerned, it doesn't matter one bit. The only thing that matters is that he's hiding. He's pretending to be somebody he isn't. And God can't get to you when you do that. The only way that God can come to you is for you to be who you really are. And in Biblical language, that's called humility. Stop pretending. And it leads not to humiliation or to defeat as we fear, but rather it leads to freedom - the ability to accept yourself as you really are because you know now that God loves you just the way you are.

PRECEDED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST And God's coming into the world was preceded by John the Baptist to show us that those events that shake us up and disturb us, that strip us of our dignity, that humble us, that tear off our masks, all of those events that we hate so much are John the Baptist events. And the good of them may be that they will prepare us for understanding who and what Jesus was and is.

C. S. Lewis once put it this way:

"Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in dismay. And it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through the dismay."

And that's the clue, the key for understanding this scene from the Gospel of St. Matthew. The Pharisees and the Sadducees came to John wanting to enter the Kingdom, into that unspeakable comfort, by just flashing their credentials. John says, it's not that easy. Don't presume that you can simply sashay into the Kingdom of God flashing your credentials. You won't get there that way. You get there by humility.

So when something happens to you, something that knocks you off your pins and humbles you and embarrasses you, leads you even to dismay - whatever - then look up. Get ready. It may be a John the Baptist event, sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of His life and His glory.

PRAYER: Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then - powerful to heal, to speak, to save. Think of Him as He is now, powerful as the Spirit of God among us....to lift us up out of the low places and to set our feet once again on the High way. O God, draw us to Him who is the perfect incarnation of Thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of his great love for all mankind. Amen.