

ARE YOU THE ONE?

JOHN THE BAPTIST

A Sermon by the Rev. Grant R. Schnarr

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And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” (Matthew 11:2-3)

Lord, are you the One? I’m not as sure as I used to be. This is not what it’s supposed to look like! I heard your call, some say, from my mother’s womb. I wandered the wilderness most of my life and survived on locusts and honey! And in that wilderness, I cried out, for you. I’m far from perfect, but I stood up against what is wrong for what is right, and I have tried to be that voice of one, preparing the way for the One. But now my cries are absorbed into these damp prison walls, and it is becoming more apparent to me every day, every hour, I don’t have forever. And I don’t hear you coming. I can’t see your plan. This is not working out the way I believed or hoped for? I am officially asking, “Are you the one?”

Is this John the Baptist? He would not have sent messengers from prison to ask Jesus this question if he were not in some sort of doubt. He wouldn’t have asked if there was someone else out there if it had been going the way he assumed. And we cannot overlook the fact that he was languishing in a damp dark dungeon, and as he was a man of God, I’m pretty sure he had more than an inkling he wouldn’t be here forever. Is this John the Baptist? We don’t know his thoughts for sure. But one thing we do know, this is us.

We are quite familiar from the teachings of the New Church and personal experience that we will undergo temptations. We feel alone, we find ourselves in the dark. After all we thought

we'd done, we doubt we have done anything the right way, or even missed the target on the whole thing. Even after doing significant spiritual work in our lives, we, like John, can feel our own prison walls of doubt closing in. We wonder, "Has my belief been wrong? Has what I've been through, fought for, been for nothing? We may ask in our minds, one way or another, "Lord, are you the One I thought would come? Have I misunderstood the call within, somehow missed where I was really supposed to go?" The question, "Should we look for another?" can mean in our spiritual time of crisis, "Is there some other way I could have followed, should have followed, after all this?"

These questions, though seeming harsh, are valid questions in times of temptation. John was a harsh fellow. Some say his question to the Lord, "Should we look for another" may have been something of a dig. Meaning something like, "Are you the one or not? If so, let's go." He thought the Messiah would clean house, take the axe to the tree, change this world. Don't we expect, especially in our spiritual youth, the Lord to clean house in our minds and hearts, take the axe to those deeply rooted hereditary evils, change our world? We expect him to change our whole world! But the Lord's ministry in us does not work the way we assume. Who John called the "One Who is to Come" is always coming into our lives, every day. Though we, like John at the end of his life, become uncertain of the Lord's presence in our lives, He is with us, and very much doing his work of changing our hearts and minds. And so, as John begins his ministry, he proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2).

John's words were accurate, the kingdom of heaven was at hand, the Messiah was about to begin his ministry. And John performed the critical role of preparing his way. Though doubts may come, the work that John did was right on track. Even as his father, Zacharias had

prophesied, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people.” (Luke 1:76-77)

We are told that John began his mission in the wilderness of Judea, preparing the way for the Messiah. He was, in the spirit of Elijah, “the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord!’” (Matt. 3:3) He was dressed in clothes made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He called all to repentance and baptized the many who came to him in the Jordan river.

In the internal sense, John represents the literal sense of the Word, the simple but powerful teachings that lead us to begin our turning away from evil, our repentance and spiritual washing. John’s clothing is symbolic of the literal truths from the Word, and “by ‘locusts’” the Writing say, “are signified ultimate or most general truths; and by ‘wild honey’ their pleasantness.” (AC 9372). In us, his work corresponds to the very first work of repentance. In other words, this is where we start, or rather where the Lord starts his work within us. These literal teachings of repentance urge us to change. The teachings about the consequences of our actions shake us awake. We get the message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 3:2).

It is hard to overestimate the significance of John’s ministry. So much falsity from hell had darkened the world and thus people’s lives, that we are told John’s ministry kept people alive until the Lord had come. We read in *True Christianity*, “John prepared the way... through baptizing and also announcing the coming of the Lord; and that if this preparation had not

occurred, all people there would have been struck with a curse and would have perished.” (TCR 688). What a profound statement of what John’s ministry did for the world.

But this process is similarly profound when applied to our individual lives. Imagine John’s solitary voice not only echoing out into the wilderness but into the utter darkness and void on a spiritual plane at that time. That’s also true in our lives. That is where we are before we hear the call of John, the Lord’s word calling us to change our ways, being cleansed in the first truths of repentance, and opening our hearts and minds, to begin to let the Lord in.

Historically people did hear John, and many came to be baptized in the Jordan. Spiritually, do you remember his call in your wilderness? Being struck by some truth that ultimately came from his Word, that not only touched you, but woke you up? Remember the ones that spurred you into examining your life, with the realization that your actions have eternal consequences? Remember when you realized that you were hurting yourself and others, and that you needed to call on the Lord and turn, turn away from evil toward good. It may not have felt so profound as that. In the wilderness of our lives that voice may seem distant, an inkling that we need to change, a sense that we should be going a different direction, but our response to this call sends us toward the Jordan river to begin our process of receiving the Lord into our lives. If we are growing, we hear his call and we respond.

In the beginning of our spiritual growth, we mostly focus on our external lives, and rightly so, shunning evils as sins against God, learning to do good. John, the external or literal truth from the Word is what inspires and guides us. But as we progress things change. It’s not all about outward change. The Lord begins to change our hearts.

Listen to this, from the work *True Christianity*, paragraph 571:

There are two states that we all inevitably enter into and go through if we are to turn from an earthly person into a spiritual person. The first state is called reformation, the second is called regeneration. In the first state we look from our earthly self toward having a spiritual self; being spiritual is what we long for. In the second state we become someone who is both spiritual and earthly. The first state is brought about by truths...of faith; through these truths we aim to develop goodwill. The second state is brought about by good actions that come from goodwill.... (TCR 571)

John's ministry is our first state that focuses on our outward lives, and then the Lord begins his ministry, the second state which focuses on what we love in our inward lives. The first state is all about following the truths of faith. The second state, accomplished by the Lord alone, is all about the good of faith, and the good of love. (AC 9229) That is why John says, "I baptize you with the water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is more powerful than I.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (John 1:11-12) And as the Writings say, "Love is spiritual fire." (CL 235)

As Jesus approaches John to be baptized, John is hesitant, suggesting that he should be baptized by Jesus, but Jesus urges him to let it happen, so that all righteousness may be fulfilled. Why does John baptize Jesus, and not the other way around? Literally it was showing that they were one in mission and purpose, and that John prepared the way that Jesus would take, and that Jesus would become the very Way, Truth, and Life. (John 14:6)

Spiritually, because this holy act represents the transition or shift from the external to the internal, or faith to love. In a way, John's baptism of Jesus, seen as fulfilling all righteousness, could be viewed figuratively as something of an ordination or induction, marking a spiritual transition from externals to internals, from reformation to regeneration.

We read further in *True Christianity*, paragraph 571, “The first state is a state of thought that occurs in our intellect [John’s ministry]; the second state is a state of love that occurs in our will [Jesus’ Ministry].” The passage goes on to say, “As the second state begins and progresses, a change takes place in our minds. There is a reversal.... As good actions that come from love take on a primary role, and the truths related to faith are relegated to a secondary role, we become spiritual and are a new creation.” And so, it shifts from John to Jesus as the Lord’s ministry continues in our lives. That is why John declares to his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30). Our focus changes. More than just trying to do what is right; we love what is right and are living it more each day. We *do* continue to shun evil in repentance even as we are being regenerated. The ministry of John and Jesus overlap, though the focus on John fades to the background as the story of Jesus’s ministry fully takes over the divine narrative. John decreases and Jesus increases in both the literal and spiritual stories. And spiritually, it becomes all about the Lord’s work in us.

So, what happens next for John? The narrative indeed turns to the Lord’s ministry, and the story of John passes into obscurity, only to emerge one more time, not as a storybook ending where John rides off into the sunset, but where John languishes in prison, alone, wondering what has happened. We can imagine him taking stock of his life, wondering where the Lord is, or why it didn’t happen the way it was supposed to, at least in his eyes. And that is also us. In times of doubt, especially as we take stock in our lives, we can feel in our hearts that the coming of the Lord in our lives didn’t seem to be what we thought it would be. In the deepest temptations we feel we missed the whole point, somehow, somewhere.

John sent his disciples to ask the Lord if he was, indeed, the One to Come, or do they look for another. Jesus' answer was very different than John expected. His answer to us is very different for us as well. The Lord's focus is not on externals, but within, creating us anew, leading us to heaven. The Lord's work is often mysterious, quiet, beautiful, and not the sweeping external changes we may have assumed. We are told, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9) This is the essential promise to John and to all of us. When we ask in our hearts if the Lord is here, if he is working in our lives, he does answer us. Not as we expected, but even greater, more real, beyond everything we could have dreamed.

"And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:4-6)

If we are willing to reflect from the Lord and his guidance in times of doubt, we have an opportunity to hear and see what real change means, what real miracles look like, not the one's out there, but inside our hearts. We shouldn't be offended that things are working out in a way we did not see, but rather rejoice. Look at your life. Have you not received sight, a glimmer in your eye as he makes a heavenly secret known to you, or witnessing a spiritual dawn of understanding that never fades? Has he, in your brokenness, lifted you up into wholeness and healing. You're up and walking again. Something you never thought possible, spiritually. Have you experienced waking from the numbness of self-centeredness into the depths of feeling that only love brings, in both sadness and joy? Have you felt yourself raised from the

grip of spiritual death into real life, and a new way of living? Have you ever let yourself hear the good news that the Lord created you to be with him in heaven?

Don't look for heaven in externals, but rather the Lord says, "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) He urges us to seek first the kingdom of God, to focus on the treasures of heaven. These are the real and lasting things. (Matt. 6:33: 6:20). This is what the One Who is and Who was and Who is to come brings to each of us and the world. When we realize this, temptation passes, and instead of fear and confusion, we find comfort, and even gratitude for all he is accomplishing within us.

I'd like to think John heard from his disciples Jesus's words and found comfort in them, and even joy, as he realized that all had been fulfilled, at least all that he was called upon to do. This man saved the world, and prepared the way for our Lord. His ministry would end now, mission accomplished. And as the footsteps of the guards can be heard approaching the cell, with new orders from Herod, perhaps we can imagine John reciting these words, if not with a smile then with a tranquil understanding, "He must increase, but I must decrease." All is finished here for him now, but for the entire human race, it is just beginning.

"There was a man sent from God whose name was John." (John 1:7)

AMEN

Lessons: John 1:6-9; Matthew 3:3-11; Matt. 11:1-10; TCR 510:2, 688