

TRAILBLAZER

MATTHEW



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T . M . M O O R E
The Fellowship of Ailbe

Trailblazer: Matthew 3
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Matthew 3: Introduction

John the Baptist makes it clear that the coming of the Messiah means the coming of the Kingdom. The way into that Kingdom is through faith in the coming One, and repentance from all known sins. The Messiah, John insisted, was coming to gather His chosen ones to Himself; all who opposed, ignored, or denied Him would be burned like chaff.

The Gospel of the Kingdom is Good News, and John was its Trailblazer.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Voice in the Wilderness

Pray Psalm 2.7, 8.

“I will declare the decree:
The LORD has said to Me,
‘You *are* My Son,
Today I have begotten You.
Ask of Me, and I will give You
The nations *for* Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession.”

Sing joyously Psalm 2.7, 8.

(*Agincourt: [O Love, How Deep, How Broad, How High!](#)*)

Proclaim the message far and wide, that God has exalted the Crucified!
From heav’n He sent us His only Son, Who has for us salvation won!

Read Matthew 3; meditate on Matthew 3.1-3.

Prepare.

1. Where did John preach?
2. How would you summarize John’s message?

Meditate.

John appeared in the wilderness in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Is. 40.3-5). “In those days” refers to the time of Israel’s captivity to Rome, not to the time Jesus was spending in Nazareth as a child. John is a relative of Jesus (cf. Lk. 2.36), and was six months older than the Lord (in human terms).

John didn’t exactly make it easy for people to hear him. He carried out his ministry “in the wilderness” near Aenon and Salim, by the Jordan (Jn. 3.23). The wilderness – barren and inhabited by wild beasts and devils (Mk. 1.12, 13) – was not a place to which people normally resorted. I often wonder about who first heard John, as he passed through that wild place, and then told others about him and his message. What would he have said about this strange man, so oddly dressed, and preaching such a hard message?

John’s preaching soon became widely known, and people came to him from “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan” (v. 5). When they finally reached him in that remote place, the first word they heard was a demand that they repent. How unlike much current preaching. These days we want our preaching to be easy to receive. So we provide air-conditioned rooms, comfortable seating, happy songs before and after, sermons filled with stories and anecdotes, and all of this designed not to demand much of anything, but to make people feel good about themselves as followers of Jesus. What would John say?

John’s preaching blazed the trail for the coming of the Kingdom, as Isaiah further explained (Is. 40.6-31). He proclaimed that the Kingdom of heaven was near. The phrase “Kingdom of heaven” should be understood as “Kingdom that comes from heaven.” It is thus also the “Kingdom of God.” Entry to the Kingdom, John declared, is through the gate of repentance. Those who are not willing to confess their sins and turn from them are not fit to enter the Kingdom. This is still true today. Repentance and faith are the way into the Gospel and Kingdom of Christ (cf. Acts 2.37-39), and confession and repentance are ongoing disciplines of every true believer.

By quoting this portion of Isaiah 40, Matthew would have cued up that entire chapter for his Jewish readers. Isaiah 40 proclaims the coming of God's glory for all people, and the "good tidings" of Immanuel (Is. 40.5, 9). The King is coming to rule and reward His people, and to feed and tend them like a flock (vv. 10, 11). He brings with Him justice and the knowledge of God (vv. 14), and a warning to the nations of judgment (vv.18-24), but a promise of salvation for all who wait on the Lord (vv. 25-31).

John's ministry blazed the trail for the coming King and His Kingdom. And, in a very real sense, his work continues in all who know and proclaim Jesus today.

Reflect.

1. Why do you suppose John didn't make it easier for people to hear his message?
2. How do we prepare the way of the Lord for those who do not know Him?
3. Why are confession and repentance still important disciplines for every believer?

John adds, "The kingdom of heaven is near." So do you want the kingdom of heaven to also be near for you? Prepare these ways in your heart, in your senses and in your soul. Pave within you the way of chastity, the way of faith and the way of holiness. Build roads of justice. Remove every scandal of offense from your heart. For it is written: "Remove the stones from the road." And then, indeed, through the thoughts of your heart and the very movements of your soul, Christ the King will enter along certain paths. Chromatius (fl. 400), Tractate on Matthew 8.1

Show me my sins, Lord, and I will repent, so that I may...

Pray Psalm 2.9-12.

Today you will go forth into your Personal Mission Field with the message of Good News. Use this time to prepare for the day, and for the opportunities you will have to prepare others to come to Jesus.

Sing Psalm 2.9-12.

Psalm 2.9-12 (*Agincourt: [O Love, How Deep, How Broad, How High!](#)*)

To Christ the Lord be given all who humbly embrace Him and on Him call.
Be wise, be warned: His judgment comes to break the prideful, sinful ones.

Rejoice with fear in Jesus' grace, and worship before His exalted face!
Beware His anger and judgment grim: How blessed are all who rest in Him!

2 Drawn to Repentance

Pray Psalm 38.1-4.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your wrath,
Nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure!
For Your arrows pierce me deeply,
And Your hand presses me down.
There is no soundness in my flesh
Because of Your anger,
Nor *any* health in my bones
Because of my sin.
For my iniquities have gone over my head;
Like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.

Sing with conviction Psalm 38.1-4.

(Leoni: [*The God of Abraham Praise*](#))

O Lord, rebuke me not, nor chasten me in wrath!
Your arrows pierce my sinful heart and fill my path.
Your heavy hand weighs down; my flesh and bones grow weak.
My sins oppress, confuse, confound – I cannot speak!

Read Matthew 3.1-6; meditate on verses 4-6.

Prepare.

1. How was John dressed? What did he eat?
2. Who came to hear John's preaching?

Meditate.

John fits the descriptions of Elijah in 2 Kings 1.1-8; and we recall that among the last words of the Old Testament are those promising that Elijah will come to blaze a trail for the Messiah (Mal. 4.5, 6). Jesus identified John the Baptist with Elijah who was to come (Matt. 11.14). Matthew thus continues his efforts to bridge the Old and New Testaments, putting Jesus at the center of each.

John's was an austere existence to say the least. He understood his calling (Jn. 1.19-23), and he needed nothing more than the bare essentials to fulfill it. We perhaps look on John as a rude and exceptional person, not one to be emulated. But Jesus said he was the greatest man born of women prior to the coming of the Kingdom (Matt. 11.11). We may not dress like John, and probably don't fancy his diet; however, we should certainly strive to be like him in understanding and pursuing our calling in the Kingdom with as little distraction and as much zeal as possible.

People came to John from "Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan" to confess their sins, repent, and be baptized. John was not offering them prosperity or fun times. He was offering forgiveness and a heart ready for the coming of the Kingdom of God. We may not think the message of repentance, forgiveness, and making ready for the Kingdom to have much drawing power. Certainly we don't hear much preaching about such topics in our day. But God uses such preaching to draw unto Himself those whose hearts He has prepared. Do we believe He does this still? Do we understand that we are continuously in need of His reviving grace and truth, to cleanse us of our sins and prepare us for life in His Kingdom?

John baptized people as an outward sign of their confession and repentance. Those who submitted to baptism were expected to live differently, to bring forth the kind of fruit in their lives which accompanies true repentance from sin (v. 8). Baptism was the *starting-point*, not the *end game*, for those who came to John.

Reflect.

1. All believers are called to the Kingdom and glory of God, like John (1 Thess. 2.12). How would you describe your calling in the Kingdom?
2. John's message probably sounds a bit "hard" to us. But why do we need to hear him yet today?
3. What is the role of baptism in the life of a believer? How can you use each baptism that you witness to renew your commitment to the Lord?

See how great was the power of the coming of the prophet! He stirred up the people. He called them to consider the meaning of their own sins. It was indeed worthy of wonder to behold his remarkable human form, his great freedom of speech, the strength of his reproof of all as if they were children and the abundant grace beaming out from his countenance. John Chrysostom (344-407), *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 10.5*

Show me, today and every day, the sins I need to confess, O Lord; and lead me to repentance so that I...

Pray Psalm 38.9-22.

We have to listen for the Lord to convict us of sin and lead us to repentance (cf. Ps. 139.23, 24). Listen now for the Spirit's conviction. Confess and repent of your sins as He leads.

Sing Psalm 38.9-22.

Psalm 38.9-22 (Leoni: [The God of Abraham Praise](#))

You know all my desire, my sighs You know full well.
My strength fails and light's holy fire my eyes dispel.
My friends and loved ones fail; the wicked do me wrong.
My life they seek, my soul assail the whole day long.

Their threats I will not heed, nor speak to their reproof.
To hear or speak I have no need – I claim Your truth!
Lord, hear my fervent prayer! Let not my foes rejoice.
Redeem me from their traps and snares – Lord, hear my voice!

My sins I now confess; my anxious soul relieve!
Though foes are strong, Lord, heal and bless all who believe!
Forsake me not, O Lord! Repay my foes with wrath.
Stand by me with Your saving Word and guard my path!

3 Warning of Judgment

Pray Psalm 96.1-4.

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples.
For the LORD *is* great and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.

Sing joyfully Psalm 96.1-4.

(Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above)

Sing to the Lord! O, bless His Name! All nations tell His glory!
Salvation's tidings loud proclaim; let earth rehearse His story!
For God is greatly to be praised; His throne above all gods is raised –
fear Him, and sing His glory!

Read Matthew 3.1-10; meditate on verses 7-10

Prepare.

1. Of what did John warn the Pharisees and Sadducees?
2. What did he call them to do?

Meditate.

Religious leaders arrived to find out who this upstart prophet is (cf. Jn. 1.19-28). The Pharisees and Sadducees were the keepers of tradition and, by implication, the certifiers of all preachers. So when they heard about John, they sent a delegation to learn whether he had the proper credentials for this sort of work. If you didn't have the schooling, they could shut you down.

Before the delegation could get a word out, however, John spoke a word to them: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He reinterpreted their mission. They thought they had come to find out about John, but John said they had come to escape the judgment that had been building against them for years.

I can't help it: Every time I read this passage, I think of the scene in *The Princess Bride* where the evil count says to Wesley, "Surrender!" To which Wesley replies, "You wish to surrender? Very well, I accept." The Jewish leaders came to find out about John. John helped them find out about *themselves*. And it wasn't what they'd always believed.

John even anticipated their response: "We have Abraham for our father!" But John says. God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones.

John told them what they needed to know, not what they'd come to discover: They needed to repent, because "even now" (v. 10) the judgment of God was about to break bad on them.

People need to know Jesus. But first they need to know that they need Him. The Good News of Jesus is incomplete unless it is accompanied by the bad news of what lies ahead for those who reject

the Lord. And since judgment is even now begins at the household of God (1 Pet. 4.17), John's warning is appropriate for us as well.

Reflect.

1. Look at Romans 1.18-32. What forms is the judgment of God taking right now?
2. Why do people need to know about repentance before they can receive the Good News of Jesus?
3. What credentials did John have for his calling? What credentials do you have for yours?

There is no doubt this axe signifies the power of the divine word, for God says through Jeremiah the prophet: "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" Therefore this axe which is laid at the very roots of interior faith in this forest of humanity always implies the severe threat of divine judgment.

Chromatius (fl. 400), *Tractate on Matthew 11.1*

O God, the world is under wrath and judgment, and I know what it needs! Help me today to...

Pray Psalm 96.8-13.

The judgment of God is upon the earth even now (cf. Rom. 1.18-32). Pray that God will spare the nations, and that His people will proclaim the Gospel and call people to repent and believe.

Sing Psalm 96.8-13.

Psalm 96.8-13 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above*)

Bring offerings sweet to Him, our Lord, in holy garments praise Him!
Tremble before Him, all the earth; among the nations raise Him!
The earth is fixed, it will not move; the peoples will His justice prove –
exalt the Lord and praise Him!

Let heaven sing with lusty voice; let earth and sea sing sweetly!
Let fields and trees in Him rejoice, for He is coming swiftly
to judge the world in righteousness, the peoples in His faithfulness –
He comes; exalt Him greatly!

4 Spirit and Fire

Pray Psalm 126.1-3.

When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion,
We were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing.
Then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
And we are glad.

Sing contemplatively Psalm 126.1-3.

(Truro: [*Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*](#))

When God restored our fortunes all,
we were like those who sweetly dream.
Our mouths with joy and laughter filled,
made Him our constant song and theme.

Then the astonished nations said,
“The Lord has done great things for them!”
Indeed, great things our God has done,
Whose Name we praise, Amen, Amen!

Read Matthew 3.1-12; meditate on verses 11, 12.

Prepare.

1. What would Jesus do differently than John?
2. What was Jesus coming to do?

Meditate.

John used what would have been a very familiar image to describe for his hearers the ministry of the coming One. In those days, grain was harvested by breaking off the heads and gathering them in piles. The piles were then flailed and winnowed, a process that involved repeatedly throwing the kernels up in the air with a kind of sieve, to separate the chaff from the grain. Some of the chaff would fall through the sieve to the threshing floor, and some would blow away in the wind. The grain settled onto the sieve – the “winnowing fan” – and was secured for use. Then the threshing floor would have been swept clean, and the chaff that did not blow away in the wind would have been gathered and burned.

This is what Jesus was coming to do. Those who received John’s baptism indicated a readiness to receive the coming Kingdom. They testified before God and men that they repented of their sins, were washed of them, and were made ready vessels for the Lord’s purposes. John’s baptism was merely preparatory and symbolic, however. The baptism of Jesus was of a totally different kind.

The Spirit is the Wind of God to separate the chaff of sin from our souls, and the chaff of sinners from the congregation of the righteous. The “winnowing fan” Jesus bears is the proclamation of the Kingdom. How people respond to the announcement that the Kingdom and righteousness of God

have come in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ determines whether they are precious kernels to be saved and gathered to the Lord, or vile chaff to be swept away and burned in “unquenchable fire.” Jesus will “thoroughly” clean His threshing floor; not a chosen kernel will be lost, and not a condemned bit of chaff will remain.

No wonder John considered himself unworthy even to carry the sandals of the Lord. We don’t carry His sandals. But others will know, by the way we deal with the chaff of sin, and how we use the winnowing fan of the Gospel, whether we carry His Name.

Reflect.

1. How does the idea of a winnowing fan apply to your life in Christ?
2. Jesus came to separate and gather. How does this apply to our lives as His followers?
3. How does the Holy Spirit remove the chaff of sin from our lives? What is our role in this?

The function of the fan is to separate the fruitful from the unfruitful. That the decision lies in God’s hands is indicated by his splendid wheat, the ripened fruit of believers, to be stored in barns. But the chaff indicates the futility of the unprofitable and unfruitful who are fit for the fire of burning judgment. Hilary of Poitiers (315-367), On Matthew 2.4

Winnow my soul, Holy Spirit, and send me forth today to...

Pray Psalm 126.4-6.

Weep for your sins, and ask Jesus to winnow them out of your life, and break you free from captivity to sin. Then seek His grace and leading as you go forth to sow in your Personal Mission Field.

Sing Psalm 126.4-6.

Psalm 126.4, 5 (Truro: [*Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*](#))

Restore our fortunes, Lord our King!
Let grace like flowing streams prevail.
All they with tears of joy shall sing
who sow while yet they weep and wail.

They who in tears of sorrow sow
and cast their seed on every hand,
with joy shall reach their heav’nly home,
and bring the harvest of their land.

5 To Fulfill All Righteousness

Pray Psalm 42.1-3.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me,
“Where is your God?”

Sing contemplatively Psalm 42.1-3.

([Nettleton: Come Thou Fount](#))

As the deer pants for fresh water let my soul, Lord, pant for You!
Let my soul thirst as it ought to for the Savior, ever true!
Tears by day have been my portion, tears by night have been my food,
While my foes add to my sorrow, saying, “Where now is your God?”

Read Matthew 3.1-15; meditate on verses 13-15.

Prepare.

1. Why was John reluctant to baptize Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus insist on it?

Meditate.

John right away recognized Jesus as the Lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the world (cf. Jn. 1.29-36). No wonder he hesitated to accept Him for baptism. Indeed, he seems almost astonished that Jesus would want to be baptized by him (v. 14). He thought Jesus should baptize him.

But Jesus said, “Permit it *to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” What did He mean by that.

First, Jesus understood that He had come to earth “to fulfill all righteousness.” To do this, He would have to keep the Law of God in complete and exhaustive detail, because the Law of God is holy and righteous and good. Jesus was often accused of violating Jewish traditions. He was even accused of transgressing Roman law. But no one could ever make a case against Him where the Law of God was fulfilled. God called His people to fulfill His Law, to be holy as He is holy, so that they might live as He intends (Lev. 18.1-5). But no one can keep the Law of God – except Jesus. The righteousness that He fulfilled is accounted to all who believe in Him, who deny that they have any righteousness of their own with which to commend themselves to the heavenly Father, and who cling to Jesus’ righteousness for their hope and salvation (2 Cor. 5.21).

Theologians refer to this as the *active* obedience of Christ. His *passive* obedience is seen in His submitting to the cross and bearing the judgment of God against our sins. But without His active obedience on our behalf, His death would have been without power, and His resurrection would never have occurred.

Second, when Israel came out of Egypt, they were “baptized through the sea”, as Paul explained (1 Cor. 10.1, 2). From this “baptism”, Israel plunged into the wilderness, before again being “baptized”

through the Jordan to undertake the conquest of the land. Jesus, God's Son called out of Egypt to recapitulate and fulfill the redemptive plan of God, was baptized in the Jordan before heading off into the wilderness to defeat and bind the one who held the nations captive to his lies.

Jesus needed to be baptized by John, not because He had sin to repent of, but because He was the sin-bearer and salvation-bringer for all who repent and believe the Good News of His Kingdom and salvation.

Reflect.

1. Why is baptism important? What does baptism proclaim?
2. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness by keeping God's Law. What does this suggest about our use of God's Law?
3. Why was it so important that Jesus should identify with Israel in the Old Testament?

When he who is perfect according to the law was baptized with the baptism of John, he became the first to achieve the perfection of the law. For this reason even Christ, who was perfect in the law, was baptized with the baptism of John. For this reason he says, "For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Theodore of Heraclea (d. 355), Fragment 21

Clothe me with Your righteousness today, Lord Jesus, as I...

Pray Psalm 42.4-11.

Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness for you! Let Him lift your soul into the joy of His salvation as you pray and sing of your Rock and your God!

Sing Psalm 42.4-11.

Psalm 42.2-11 ([Nettleton: Come Thou Fount](#))

Now I pour my soul out in me as these thoughts come to my mind.
And I long to once again be where true worship I might find.
Oh my soul, be not despairing! Hope in God, and praise His Name!
For the Lord, your burden bearing, will restore your peace again.

Oh my God, my soul is weary, therefore I remember You.
Let Your grace and goodness near be, and Your promise, firm and true.
Lord, when trials and fears surround me, Your commands will be my song.
When distresses sore confound me, Your great love will keep me strong.

Lord, forget me not in mourning 'neath my foes' oppressing hand.
See their mocking, hear their scorning; help my weary soul to stand.
Hope in God, praise Him forever when despair on you has trod.
Look to Jesus; never, never doubt your gracious, saving God.

6 Already

Pray Psalm 85.7-9.

Show us Your mercy, LORD,
And grant us Your salvation.
I will hear what God the LORD will speak,
For He will speak peace
To His people and to His saints;
But let them not turn back to folly.
Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him,
That glory may dwell in our land.

Sing joyfully Psalm 85.7-9.

(Lyons: [O Worship the King](#))

Lord, show us Your love; restore us, we pray!
And help us to hear the words that You say.
Speak peace to Your people; in truth let us stand.
We fear You; let glory and grace fill our land.

Read Matthew 3.1-17; meditate on verses 16, 17.

Prepare.

1. To what did Jesus emerge from His baptism?
2. What did God say concerning Him?

Meditate.

When Israel came through the waters of the Jordan, her fight had just begun. Securing the promised land would take many long years of battle. Only then would the people know God's rest (Josh. 21.43-45). Yet even then, that rest would be fragile and fleeting (Heb. 4.8-10).

By contrast, when Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan, heaven opened to Him; the Spirit of God alighted on Him "like a dove"; and God declared His pleasure in His Son. It was as if He had *already* accomplished His great work, had *already* been anointed as King, had *already* fulfilled His mission, and was *already* putting His enemies under His feet. The reference to Psalm 2 is unmistakable; and the pleasure of God – that Jesus should accomplish the redemption of His people and the saving of the world – was as if it were *already* a done deal.

Much work remained to be done, of course. But the Word from heaven assures us that, whatever Jesus would have to face in the days ahead, He is God's Son, and God is pleased with Him.

We can know the same assurance (Jn. 1.12). We are the children of God through faith in Jesus. He is well pleased with us, because we are *in* Jesus, and *already* the heavens have been opened to us. But there is much work to do, and there will be many struggles before we obtain all that God has promised and Jesus has secured for us. We look to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, to help us run our race (Heb. 12.1-3). The Spirit that descended on Him dwells in us, and He will see us safely through every challenge and struggle to our home in heaven, where Jesus *already* reigns, and is even now preparing a place for us.

Reflect.

1. This passage gives some insight to the work of the three Persons of the Trinity. Explain.
2. What is the significance of Jesus' seeing the heavens opened to Him? How would this have sustained Him through His ministry? Why does this matter for us?
3. How can we take courage from the Father's pronouncement about His Son?

Here then we have the Trinity presented in a clear way: the Father in the voice, the Son in the man, the Holy Spirit in the dove. This only needs to be barely mentioned, for it is so obvious for anyone to see. Here the recognition of the Trinity is conveyed to us so plainly that it hardly leaves any room for doubt or hesitation... This ineffable Divinity, abiding ever in itself, making all things new, creating, creating anew, sending, recalling, judging, delivering, this Trinity, I say, we know to be at once indescribable and inseparable. Augustine (354-430), Sermon 2.1-2

Jesus, You have gone before me into heaven; go before me into this day, so that I...

Pray Psalm 85.10-13.

Mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace have all come together in Jesus! Praise the Lord for sending His Son for our salvation, and ask Him to bring His goodness to light in all your words and deeds today.

Sing Psalm 85.10-13.

Psalm 85.10-13 (Lyons: [*O Worship the King*](#))

In Jesus God's grace and truth are combined;
both goodness and peace in Him do we find.
Truth springs from the earth as He walks in our midst,
and righteousness flows from the heav'ns as a gift.

The Lord by His grace will give what is good.
Our land will produce abundance of food.
And righteousness will go before the Lord's face,
and make of His footsteps a way in this place.

7 The Gospel of the Kingdom

Pray Psalm 66.13-16.

I will go into Your house with burnt offerings;
I will pay You my vows,
Which my lips have uttered
And my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble.
I will offer You burnt sacrifices of fat animals,
With the sweet aroma of rams;
I will offer bulls with goats. Selah
Come *and* hear, all you who fear God,
And I will declare what He has done for my soul.

Sing joyfully Psalm 66.13-16.

(Regent Square: Angels from the Realms of Glory)

To Your house we come with offerings, what we vowed, Lord, help us do.
O, receive our praise and homage as we give ourselves to You.
Come and listen, all who fear Him: hear what this great God can do!

Read aloud and meditate on Matthew 3.

Prepare.

1. From this chapter, what seem to be the key components announcing the Kingdom?
2. For what was John preparing the people? What was “at hand”?

Meditate.

John came as the forerunner and trailblazer of Christ. Christ came to bring the Kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven – His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. John understood this, steeped as he clearly was in Old Testament revelation; so his message of repentance was with a view to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The coming of the *Kingdom*, not just of the *salvation* of the Lord. These days what we hear preached in many churches is the gospel of salvation, not the Gospel of the Kingdom. The gospel of salvation promises forgiveness, peace, a measure of happiness here and now (defined rather as you like), and a home in heaven in the great hereafter. The gospel of salvation *mentions* the Kingdom, but typically ignores its present implications and postpones its full realization.

As we shall see, the coming of the Kingdom has far vaster and more immanent and present implications than what most believers suppose.

John declared that the Kingdom of God was “at hand”. Jesus came to bring it, as the rest of Matthew’s narrative explains. The Gospel of the Kingdom *includes* the Good News of salvation, but not the salvation offered in today’s gospel of salvation. The salvation realized within the Kingdom is entered by *repentance* – of which we hear precious little in the gospel of salvation. The salvation realized in the Kingdom proliferates in *works* “worthy of repentance” – that is, works that prove repentance is real, self-denying, sacrificial, others-serving, witness-bearing, stake-your-life-on-it works.

The Gospel of the Kingdom *transforms* accepted traditions and ways, *replacing* them with the holy and

righteous and good Law of God, and all His Word. It is not an *add-on* to one's present busy life, but a *replacing* of that life with a *new* life, in which Christ the King rules for His glory in and through every aspect of one's life by His Word and Spirit.

The religious leaders of John's day believed they were God's chosen people, His pals and confidants, and that if anyone was going to heaven it was they.

John called them a "brood of vipers", leaving no doubt concerning his view of their paternity.

Jesus came to bring a new, long-anticipated, all-encompassing and all-transforming dimension of being to this world of time and space. His is not the gospel of salvation only, but the Gospel of the Kingdom; and if we believe anything other than what Matthew is about to unfold for us, then we're believing *another* gospel, a form of *near-Christianity*, and not the "at hand" rule of King Jesus over every area of life.

That King and His Kingdom are making all things new by His Word and Spirit. And the great victory that made it all possible begins here, in the Jordan River, before it unfolds with holy violence and total triumph in the wilderness of Judea.

Reflect.

1. Why is the gospel of salvation *another* gospel? What does it lack?
2. John said we must enter the "at hand" Kingdom by repentance, then prove our citizenship in "fruits worthy of repentance". Is this a form of salvation *by* works or *unto* works? Which is the true Gospel?
3. What does it take for us to know that God the Father is "well pleased" with us?

The kingdom of heaven? This refers to justification by faith and sanctification by the Spirit. This is why it says elsewhere, "the kingdom [of heaven] is within you." Cyril of Alexandria (375-444), Fragment 17

I am an ambassador in Your Kingdom, Lord, and today I will carry out that assignment as I...

Pray Psalm 66.1-12.

Pray that God will use present conditions in the world to prepare people for the proclamation and Good News of the Kingdom of God. Ask God specifically to use you as a trailblazer and witness in someone's life today.

Sing Psalm 66.1-12.

Psalm 66.1-12 (*Regent Square: Angels from the Realms of Glory*)

Shout for joy to God, all people, sing the glory of His Name!

Give Him glorious praise and say, "How great Your pow'r and great Your fame!

All the earth shall worship gladly as they praise Your glorious Name!"

Great and awesome is our Savior in the works which He has done.
He the sea and river dried to let His people cross as one.
Then our joy was great to worship Him our mighty, sovereign One.

He the nations watches ever – all you rebels, humbled be.
Bless our God, all men and nations, praise His Name eternally!

He preserves our souls, and He will keep His paths beneath our feet.

You have tried us, Lord, as silver, and have brought us into nets,
made us carry heavy burdens, let men trample o'er our heads.
But through all Your grace sustained us and has brought us through to rest.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Explain the difference between the gospel of salvation and the Gospel of the Kingdom.
2. What is required for entering the Kingdom? How does one validate his citizenship there?
3. Why as the Father “well pleased” with Jesus? How can we strive to make sure the Father is well pleased with us?
4. How does God, by His Word and Spirit, winnow people? How do you experience that winnowing?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from Matthew 3? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.