Sunday December 5, 1982

"JOHN THE BAPTIST" Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 Luke 3:1-6

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and be baptized as a sign of your repentance. I baptize you with water; but the one who follows me, the Messiah who is coming, is stronger than I am--he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

I am John, called the Baptist. I have been given this title because of the many people I baptized in preparing them for the coming of the Kingdom of God in the person of the Messiah, the Christ. The words you have just heard are words that I preached to the people several thousand years ago. They are recorded in the Gospels in your Bible.

My father's name was Zechariah and my mother's name Elizabeth. My father was a priest of the Hebrews, serving and working in the temple in Jerusalem. My mother was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. I was born when my parents were quite old and was their only child. In fact, for many many years my parents thought they could have no children, even though they desired a child very much.

I have been told that even before I was born, God had planned for me and had chosen me to be a special prophet, a messenger to announce the coming of God's Kingdom. Here's how it happened.

One day when my father was serving his regular term in the temple and it was his job as the priest to burn the incense, all at once he was aware of a vision, he was having. He was terrified, but the vision said to him--
"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name, John, and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. He will be one

God's great people. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of his birth and will turn many people to the Lord their God. He will go out before God in the spirit and power of such famous prophets as Elijah to reconcile fathers and mothers and children and bring back the disobedient to the wisdom of good people. And he will make a people ready for their Lord."

You can imagine the effect of such a vision upon my father. He was dumbfounded. When he recovered his composure, he told the messenger of God--"I don't believe you. My wife is too old to have a child. How can this be true?" But the vision said, "This is God's word and because you have doubted it, you will not be able to speak a word until the child is born. But you can be sure that everything I have told you will come true at the proper time."

And God's word did come true. At the time of my birth my father Zechariah regained his power of speech.

As I was growing up, I must've seemed like a strange child to many of those around me. I spent much time alone with God in the wilderness. Somehow it seemed I always knew from the beginning that God had some kind of special job for me. Like many people in my time, I had been waiting expectantly for the Messiah, so long promised in our ancient prophecies. I was sure it was my special role to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

Yet I was not sure just when and how the Messiah would appear, yet I thought I knew what the Messiah would be and do. So I went about the countryside preaching the coming, the imminent coming of God's Kingdom. My message was that God was going to enter this world in a new and unique way. I preached to the people as I preach to you now, "Repent, for God's kingdom is coming. See that you do something to show that you are changing your behavior. God's salvation is about to appear and you must be ready for it."

As I look back on it now, I guess I was a kind of a weird sight to many people. My hair was long and scraggily. I had never shaved and thus had a long beard. I had no fine clothes, but instead simply wore a garment made of camel's hair. If I dressed like that now, you would not let me in this church to preach. However, in spite of my appearance, many people did come out to hear me. And my preaching had some results.

A number of people were in a state of high expectation, waiting for the Messiah. In fact, some even thought for a time that I might be the promised Messiah. But I told the people that I only baptized with water, the Christ would baptize them with a new spirt.

Then one day as I was preaching and baptizing people near the river Jordan, I noticed a man coming toward me with a small crowd following him. Something about the person impressed me and yet I don't know exactly what it was. Immediately though, I could see that there was something unique and different about this man. His piercing eyes were bright with expectation and full of love and understanding. In fact, a special kind of love seemed to radiate all around him and in him. And there was a certain kind of magnetism about him which attracted people almost immediately. Yet, he was in most ways an ordinary looking individual.

As he came closer, I knew what was special about him--here was the hope of Israel and the world, the Messiah so long promised by God. But why was he coming here to me? As he came closer, he said that he wanted to be baptized in the river Jordan. But why? I didn't understand. If this was the Messiah, the Christ, I was not worthy to baptize him--rather he should be baptizing me.

But as we talked, I came to understand that he wanted to be baptized as a sign of his own dedication to God's work, and also as an example to others to show they should be baptized as a sign of repentance--a sign of starting life in a new direction.

Later I discovered that this was actually the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He was then about 30 years old. Before that he had been working as a carpenter in his home town of Nazareth--now after his baptism, he was going to begin his teaching. Even though there had been some strange signs surrounding his birth, he had been forgotten in the intervening years.

Thus I agreed to baptize Jesus. And then immediately after the baptism, something strange happened--so strange that it is difficult to describe. As Jesus came up out of the water, it seemed as if the heavens opened and he could hear God saying--"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

It was not long after this momentous event that my own preaching got me into trouble, serious trouble. In preaching about God's Kingdom and God's righteousness, I had spoken out against Herod the King. Among other things I had talked of his immorality in the stealing of his brother's wife. Kings do not like to be publicly criticized for their sins. As you might say today, preachers should confine their preaching to spiritual matters and not meddle in politics. But that's not true. Every major and minor prophet of God has mixed religion and politics because they cannot be separated. Church and state can be separated, but not politics and religion.

King Herod had me thrown into prison. While in prison over a period of time, some of my disciples kept bringing me news of the man Jesus I had baptized earlier. His fame was spreading throughout the territory. They said that large crowds were following him and that he had chosen an inner group of twelve disciples.

Some also brought me news that Jesus was healing people of their diseases--the blind were receiving their sight, cripples were walking, lepers were being cleansed. I even heard that Jesus saved the life of a woman caught in adultery and that he had then forgiven her. He had reformed a tax collector. He was demonstrating God's love and forgiveness for all people.

At the same time, I heard that the good church people of the time were not too happy with the kind of company Jesus was keeping and the way in which he was conducting himself. People were beginning to ask, "Can this be the Messiah?"

As I sat impatiently in prison, this same question began to bother me. I had baptized this person and I remembered his amazing qualities. But maybe I had been mistaken. After all, here I was suffering in prison! I, John, the preparer of the way for the Christ. If Jesus were truly the Messiah, would he allow me to suffer and rot in prison? I thought God's Kingdom would come with power . Certainly this man was not doing what I had expected the Messiah to do.

These thought and questions and many others tormented me. I finally decided to send some of my disciples to Jesus to find out once and for all whether or not he was the

Messiah promised for so long. Several of my followers went directly to Jesus and asked him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus gave them a rather puzzling answer, he said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see; blind people are receiving their sight, cripples are walking, lepers are being healed, the deaf are hearing, and the good news is being given to the poor and those in need." In other word, people are being freed from all kinds of slaveries and are learning to live life in God's world with a new kind of freedom and joy.

At first when my followers brought back this answer, I was more upset and puzzled than before. But as I sat in prison and thought about it for a time, some things began to come clear to me. First, I asked myself why I doubted that Jesus was the Messiah?

My answer was that my doubts had their beginning when I started hearing stories that Jesus was not fulfilling the role of the Messiah that I had expected him to fulfill. Because he did not fit my own pre-conceived notion of what I thought the Christ would be and do, I was ready to reject him and look for another who would fit my own idea more closely.

Remember that I had preached primarily about a God of judgment and about a coming MESSIAH who would be a judge in the way I thought he should be a judge. I had even thought the end of the world as I knew it would occur soon after the coming of the Messiah and that the final judgment day would be then. But now it wasn't happening like that at all. Here was Jesus walking around, loving people, healing them, forgiving, enjoying them, going to parties, eating with sinners. What kind of Messiah is that?

Yet I'm sure that all kinds of people have the same problem. They have a picture of Christ in their minds to which they expect Jesus to conform. And then when he doesn't fit that picture, they ask, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And some go off looking for another and follow all kinds of strange and bizarre leaders and cults. I was trying to create Christ in my own image and make him entirely what I wanted him to be.

As I looked at the world around me with such people as Herod and the power hungry Romans as our rulers, I was hoping for and expecting a Messiah who would come in and strike down and destroy all that I had seen as evil. I expected God to come in and simply wipe out all evil things and people and then set up his Kingdom.

But I had to learn that there is often a large difference between the idea of a thing and the thing itself. Today I suspect that some people have an idea of what the church should be and then if the church doesn't fit their own pattern, they get upset and wonder if the church is worth anything at all.

People may think that the Christian faith is not much more than singing nice comfortable hymns and saying safe prayers, but then one day they hear and learn that there is another side to the Christian faith; they hear of Churches welcoming outcasts, visiting those in prison, working for justice, demonstrating for peace and they wonder if that's what the church is all about or shall they look for some other religion.

It never occurred to me that God would work in way that I hadn't expected. I thought I knew most of what there is to know about God.

Who would've thought that the Savior of the world would be found in a baby in a stable in Bethlehem? Who would've expected that the Christ would be a carpenter and then a teacher? And who would've expected that he would allow himself to be arrested, put on trial, ridiculed, then put to death on a cross like a common criminal? And then who expected the resurrection?

Who would've expected that in this way God would show his love for the world and for all people and in so doing bring new life to all of us?

God does not always fit the patterns we devise. God does not always work in the ways we think God should work. This was the lesson that I, John the Baptist, had to learn above all others. Maybe others need to learn it too. Amen.