

A God Worth the Wait

Matthew 3:1-12

Gary Charles

Cove Presbyterian Church, Covesville, Virginia

Last Sunday, I spoke on the issue of “God abuse.” I railed against those fundamentalist and conservative pulpits in which God is portrayed as a vindictive bully, hateful to all but the select few. I lamented the growing number of victims of “God abuse” who are too wounded to reconsider faith and life in the church.

To be fair though, too many progressive pulpits have advanced their own form of “God abuse.” Much too often, progressive pulpits preach a laissez-faire God who neither commands our awe nor demands our attention. This God is remarkably distant from our daily affairs, and if present at all, is yawning while sipping an espresso, trying to stay awake while listening to our narcissistic, dispassionate prayers.

For me and all my progressive theological kin, it is a good thing that Cousin Matthew is back, has unpacked his large biblical suitcase, and is planning to stay with us for a year. The God we meet in Matthew could never be accused of being a “vindictive bully,” but neither is this God an absentee or disinterested parent, distant and aloof, happy for us to do whatever we like whenever we want to do it. The God we meet in Matthew is nothing like that and is well worth the wait.

No one points to this God with greater passion and precision than John the Baptist. I love the way Tom Long describes this oddly attired prophet:

As the door to a new era swings open, John the Baptist is the ideal hinge. He is dressed like the old age, but he points to the new. His preaching style is vintage Old Israel; his message paves the way for the New Israel. He appears to have wandered out of some retirement home for old prophets, but he announces the arrival of one who is even greater than the prophets.

Everything is about to change. The old is passing away; the new presses in. The long, long night of hopelessness is coming to an end, and John the Baptist is the rooster who awakens the sleeping world with dawn’s excited cry.¹

Just what is that dawn cry? Standing knee deep in the Jordan, “John, and the Jesus he announces arrive with the most astonishing combination of acceptance and admonition,” writes New Testament scholar David Bartlett. “We all discover . . . not only that we are cherished for who we are, but that we are responsible for what we do. . . . If God loves me enough to welcome me into Christ’s family, then God loves me enough to expect something of me.”²

The late Yale preacher and teacher of preachers, William Muehl, points to such a God in this Advent story:

One December afternoon . . . a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried

in his hands the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which he had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents all at the same time slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew from his grasp and landed on the floor and broke with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child . . . began to cry inconsolably. His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, “Now, that’s all right son. It doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter at all.”

But the child’s mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she wept with her son.³

At dawn, John the Baptist cries, “Your relationship with God matters. It matters a great deal.” For those who think of faith as a family heirloom, something to which they are genetically entitled, John says, “Think again. God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” For those who think of faith as an occasional accessory to wear on special occasions, John says, “Think again. One more powerful than I . . . will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

The God we meet in John’s pulpit is no one’s entitlement and will be no one’s accessory. John’s God will not be squeezed into anyone’s busy schedule. For the dawn cry from the Jordan is that the kingdom of heaven *is at hand*. That means that time matters, and we are to use every breath of the day to the glory of God; that justice matters, and we are to execute justice for all, but especially for the least of these; that righteousness matters, and we are to live righteous lives as a thankful sign to the world that God’s reign *is at hand*. The God to whom John points is a God who I, for one, want to know much better.

In my conversations with people who have nothing to do with the church or who were once active in the church but are no longer, I hear a common lament. Some are angry about something they have heard, or they have had a sour experience of church earlier in life. Some feel that they were ignored in a time of need. Some *were* ignored in a time of need.

Mostly, though, the common lament that I hear is one of profound “apathy.” They feel no compelling reason to change anything that they now do, much less give up a perfectly fine Sunday morning or any other time during the week to worship God and commit to a life of Christian service. As they explain to me, the God they have met in too many fundamentalist pulpits is a vindictive bully, while the God they have met in too many progressive pulpits is hardly worth the wait.

I wonder what would happen if they were to encounter the God we meet in John the Baptist’s pulpit. His God loves us enough to burn away all the sorry excuses that keep us as casual spectators rather than fervent disciples. His God is no permissive pushover parent who wants us to do whatever makes us happy. His God is a doggedly engaged parent who loves us and cares for us enough to expect us to repent.

In too many progressive pulpits, the meaning of *repent* is diluted to feeling sorry for what you have done or to feeling guilty about your past. That does not scratch the surface of what “the Baptist” means when he roars, “Repent!” To repent, for John, is to say goodbye to one way of living in order to embrace the radical, in-breaking vision of God. It is to live each day with confidence that “the kingdom of heaven”

will not arrive one day in some distant future, but that the “kingdom of heaven *is at hand*.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, something decisive happened in that Bethlehem manger, in that Palestinian wilderness, on that Jerusalem cross, and on that first Easter morning. By the power of God’s Spirit, the risen Jesus is at work in our lives right now, at work in this broken world right now, and God loves us like the most devoted and demanding parent that you or I have ever met. Isaac Watts long ago captured the true dawn cry from John, the only real reason for repentance: “Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

As we enter another season of waiting, now *that* God is well worth the wait.

Notes

1. Tom Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 25.
2. *Feasting on the Word, Year A., Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 46.
3. William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 82.