

“HOPE IN THE MESSENGER”

by Rom A. Pegram (12/15/19)

Religious News Service brings us this ‘code for rating sermons’...

- "GJ"—Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive, puerile platitudes; usually described as "wonderful" or "marvelous."
- "GP"—For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the Gospel relevant to today's issues; they even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as "challenging" or "thought provoking," though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.
- "R"—Definitely restricted to those not upset by truth. This sermon "tells it like it is." Threatening the comfortable; most often described as "disturbing" or "controversial;" usually indicates that ... the preacher has an outside source of income.
- "X"—Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really "socks it to 'em." It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as "shocking" or "in poor taste." The minister who preaches this sermon had better have his suitcases packed and his life insurance paid for...

I wonder what kind of a rating John the Baptist's sermons would have received. At the outset, there seems to be an immediate confrontation between John the Baptist and a delegation of priests and Levites sent by 'the Jews'—a phrase used no less than 70 times in the Gospel, not so much to identify a race or even a religious group, but a group of religious big-shots who had organized in opposition to the ministry of Jesus. Listen now to today's story from the Gospel of John (1:6-8, 19-28, NLT)...

God sent a man, John the Baptist,⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony.⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light.

¹⁹ This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ "Well then, who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?" "No," he replied. "Are you the Prophet we are expecting?" "No." ²² "Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Clear the way for the LORD's coming!'" ²⁴ Then the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ asked him, "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?" ²⁶ John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. ²⁷ Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal." ²⁸ This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

The official delegation sent to John, once again, consisted of priests and Levites. Since John was the son of a known priest (Zacharias), they didn't beat around the bush with

him! Their question was direct and to the point: 'Who are you?' And you need to know that the manner in which John chooses to answer this question is crucial. He is standing in a place of real transition—between the Old and the New. He is the last 'prophet,' so to speak, standing between two worlds...

Folks, today's message is about finding 'HOPE IN THE MESSENGER' (as well as the message). And, here's the HOPE I want to share with you from this story...

I FIND HOPE IN A MESSENGER WHO DOESN'T 'BEAT AROUND THE BUSH'...

Verses 19-20 remind us: "The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem sent some priests and Levites to John to ask him, 'Who are you?' John did not refuse to answer, but spoke out openly and clearly, saying: 'I am not the Messiah.'" That's what they really wanted to know ... and John knew it...

Here was John's big chance: He was in the middle of a popularity that few could ever say they enjoyed; he was 'the man of the hour,' so to speak. There was nothing more exciting going on in Israel at this time than 'that guy down by the river' ... *who is baptizing everyone!* So, here was his big chance: He could either say 'he represented the company' or he could stretch the truth just a bit and maybe hint that perhaps 'he owned the company.' Which answer would you have given? John's answer was that he was simply a messenger, representing 'THE LIGHT' ... He didn't beat around the bush; he gave it to these guys straight...

By the way, have you ever noticed that light is self-revealing? Do we need to stand out in the street and shout to those who pass by, "That's the sun," as we point to it in all its brightness? No! *The sun is self-revealing in the same sense that Jesus Christ was and is the Light of the world...*

The fact that John the Baptist came to give his witness about the Light really showed the complete depravity of humanity—our inability at that time to comprehend that which was spiritual. Human minds and hearts were so darkened by sin that, seeing the Light, they didn't recognize him as the Light...

We must also remember what men and women *actually* saw down here on earth was *a human Jesus*; their darkened vision couldn't see anything superhuman in Him. It was necessary at this point in history for someone like John the Baptist to tell them ... *this One who walked with them and who ate with them was the Light of the World...*

I know several Jewish people—good people. But I've always been a bit frustrated at how they could possibly miss Jesus—the Messiah they've been looking for for years! I believe that where they're at today ... is a direct result of the blindness of their ancestors—still afflicting them today. It took John to shake them out their blindness and help them to see that Jesus was who they were waiting for. I FIND HOPE IN A MESSENGER WHO DOESN'T BEAT AROUND THE BUSH ... but brings the message from God straight forward to help us see... Also:

I FIND HOPE IN A MESSENGER WHO KNOWS THEIR JOB & STICKS TO IT...

In verses 21-23, John is asked questions: "'Who are you, then?' they asked. 'Are you Elijah?' 'No, I am not,' John answered. 'Are you the Prophet?' they asked. 'No,' he

replied. 'Then tell us who you are,' they said. 'We have to take an answer back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' John answered by quoting the prophet Isaiah: 'I am 'the voice of someone shouting in the desert: Make a straight path for the Lord to travel!'"

John is a *voice*—a herald of the Glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ! So, if John is only a 'voice,' then *why* does he baptize; why was he doing that, if he was just a 'voice'? I've gotta tell you ... it was the act of baptism that really messed these religious big-shots up. Baptism was a 'rite' (r-i-t-e) that they were very familiar with; it was part of *their* domain. Baptism was a cleansing act (in their world) for proselytes—Gentiles desiring to come into the Jewish faith. Baptism was *not* for Jews who were already God's people...

John, however, was busy baptizing EVERYONE—including Jews ... for the repentance of their sins; how could this be? John was identifying Jews right along with 'unwashed Gentiles and sinners.' How could he take this solemn act and claim it as a sign of preparation for a new movement? *John knew his job & he was sticking to it*; he didn't get sidetracked in unnecessary baptism discussions. John moved the conversation back to Jesus—'One among them who this delegation did not know!' Talk about 'ticking them off!' It wasn't about John; it was about the One whom he came to prepare the way for...

Folks, similarly, Noah's message from the steps going into the Ark was not, "Something good is going to happen to you!" Amos was not confronted by the high priest of Israel for proclaiming, "Confession is possession!" Jeremiah was not put into the pit for preaching, "I'm O.K., you're O.K.!" Daniel wasn't put into the lion's den for telling people, "Possibility thinking will move mountains!" And John the Baptist was not forced to preach in the wilderness and eventually beheaded because he preached, "Smile; God loves you!" Instead, what was the message of all these men of God? Simple, one word: "Repent!" (Wasn't that what we learned about God last week—that God's desire is for everyone to repent?)

I get tremendous hope in seeing a messenger *who knows their job and sticks to it*—regardless of what others say or think! They're intent on doing the will of God—that simple! Finally...

I FIND HOPE IN A MESSENGER WHO ALWAYS PUTS CHRIST FIRST! Verses 26-27 continue: "John answered, 'I baptize with water, but among you stands the one you do not know. He is coming after me, but I am not good enough even to untie his sandals.'"

In verse 27, we come face-to-face with John the Baptist's incredible humility; he's burned the bridges of accommodation and accepted his calling all the way. Not only is 'the One whom he announces' preferred by him ... but he's also not worthy to loosen His sandal strap! Do you realize what that means? In today's world, we might say: I am not worthy to carry out their garbage ... or I am not worthy to empty their bedpan ... or I am not worthy to clean up their [you get the idea...]!

John didn't consider himself worthy to do *any* of these things that the lowest-of-the-low in their society would have done! Who of us would say that about *anyone*—that we're not worthy to do even these lowliest of tasks? Let me remind you ... it's the 'poor in spirit' who'll inherit God's kingdom (Sermon on the Mount); and when we're with them, we know *we're in the presence of someone very special...*

Dr. Horatio Bonar once remarked that he could tell when a Christian was growing [*sanctification*—to be more and more like Christ]; he said...

"In proportion to [their] growth in grace, [they] would elevate [their] Master, talk less of what [they were] doing, and become smaller and smaller in [their] own esteem, until, like the morning star, [they] faded away before the rising sun...." John the Baptist showed the same spirit of humility ... *Christ first!*

I've found HOPE not only in the messages of scripture, but also in THE MESSENGERS God has sent to us! I've never been so thankful! And...

- I'm especially thankful God has sent me messengers *who don't beat around the bush*, but who are filled with the love of God and have the courage to tell me the truth I need to hear (not always what I want to hear, but what I *need* to hear).
- I'm thankful God has sent me messengers *who know their job and stick to it*—the ones who I've never heard anything but the GOSPEL come out of their mouths.
- And, I'm thankful for *those messengers* who—by the very way they live or have lived their lives—I know they *put Christ first in all they do!* John the Baptist was just such a messenger...

Are you thankful today for God's messengers in your life, whoever they might be? He sent John the Baptist to you, too. Be thankful for *that* messenger—for all who've brought us the Christmas story, the GOOD NEWS. And find HOPE in that messenger God's sent you this season...