

The Gospel of John the Baptist

This is the beginning of a series of sermons
That will take us through the end of February,
To the Transfiguration and the beginning of Lent.

This series is called The Chosen.

It is an invitation to reflect on what it must have been like
To be chosen by God.

But Jesus wasn't the only one chosen by God in the Gospels.

Before Christmas, I preached about Mary being chosen,
And how Luke tells us she rejoiced in her part in God's story.

Mary put her body and her future on the line
To raise a son who would change the world,
Who would fill the hungry with good things,
And turn the rich away empty.

Luke tells us that Mary's cousin Elizabeth was also chosen
To raise the son of Zechariah, who laughed at an angel,
And was struck silent until he needed to say,
"His name is John."

In Luke 3, we encounter this John as John the Baptist.
Luke sets up John the Baptist as we Christians always encounter him,
As the forerunner of Christ, a voice in the wilderness
Preparing the way of the Lord.

In the Christian tradition, we only ever think of John the Baptist
In relation to Jesus of Nazareth.

But other traditions follow closer to the historical truth,
Which is that John the Baptist was a prophet of God in his own right.
In Islam, John is known as Yahya, peace be upon him.

Along with Jesus, or Isa, peace be upon him,
Yahya, peace be upon him,
Is recognized as a prophet and messenger of Allah.
But Islam, like Christianity, still looks at John the Baptist
In relation to Jesus, again the one who prepares the way for another.
There is even a group called the Nasoreans,
Who see themselves as followers of John the Baptist today.
What if we took John the Baptist seriously as a prophet?
Not just the man who prepared the way for Jesus,
But as someone Chosen by God to deliver a unique message,
Different from that of Jesus, yet somehow compatible.
What was the Gospel of John the Baptist?
Luke presents John the Baptist as a popular figure,
With crowds coming out from the cities to be baptized in the Jordan River.
Like the other gospels, Luke says that John the Baptist preached
Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
But the actual words Luke attributes to John are harsh.
To those who have gathered to accept his baptism,
John says, "You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"
Not exactly what you would expect from a popular preacher.
Rather than praise his followers for repenting their sins,
John questions the authenticity of their repentance.
He tells them, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."
In other words, your repentance and baptism are meaningless
Unless you change the way you live.
John attacks the idea that Jewish law and Temple sacrifice

Are sufficient to transform God's people.
He says, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."
In other words, even observant Jews are subject to the judgment of God,
Whose ax is ready to dispense with those traditions
That do not bear worthy fruit.
John pioneers the concept that Jesus will later promote,
That traditions and laws should be judged by their fruit,
The actions and outcomes they produce in the present,
Not just by their connection to the past.
This is a startlingly modern concept.
Ancient people were not generally in the business
Of philosophically reorienting themselves to criticize tradition,
To judge the beliefs and practices of the past
According to a new paradigm.
Even the prophets revered in Judaism basically
Judged both rulers and the people according to their own tradition.
They faulted peasants and leaders for turning away from the law.
They did not question whether the practice of upholding the law
Betrayed the law's original purpose.
John the Baptist exposed the contradiction between religious practice
And following God's will, between the act of repentance
And bearing fruit worthy of repentance.
A fellow pastor once cautioned me,
"People like to feel challenged. They don't like to be challenged."
John the Baptist really challenged the very people
Who showed up to receive his baptism.
Rather than let them leave feeling righteous in their repentance,

John calls them the children of snakes,
Actively challenging them to actually live differently from before.
How was he able to get away with this?
How could John the Baptist speak so accusingly at his own followers,
And maintain a popular movement?
One year ago, I preached to you about John the Baptist.
I speculated that John's life in the desert,
Eating locusts and wild honey, clothed in soft camel hair
Signalled a life among the nomadic Bedouin.
Days before that sermon, a mob of Americans
Swarmed and occupied the US Capitol.
At the time, I marveled that such a mob,
Flying American flags and claiming American patriotism
Could attack the heart of American government
In an attempt to overthrow an American election,
Urged on by an American President.
A mob like that doesn't emerge in a vacuum.
As appalled and terrified as I was on that day,
I was able to recognize the discontent at the heart of that mob,
Even if I disagreed with its logic.
A mob like that only emerges when people feel disempowered,
That the system no longer works for them.
And even though the January 6 mob's anger may have been misplaced,
Against immigrants, minorities, and members of Congress,
They weren't wrong to think that our nation's institutions
Might be unworthy of our trust.
Societies, governments, institutions,

They can become broken. It happens.
It has happened numerous times since John the Baptist,
And it will happen again.
When the general population sniffs the scent of corruption
Strongly enough to suspect the truth,
That societies are constructed to benefit those in power
At the expense of the rest,
They react. They seek out certainty in the midst of chaos.
And if they can't find certainty, a certain portion will embrace the chaos.
They will even act to increase and exacerbate the chaos,
In the hope that even chaos might be better than the status quo.
We don't know the full extent of John the Baptist's preaching.
We don't know how John convinced hundreds of Judeans
To dunk themselves in the silt-laden current of the Jordan River
For the forgiveness of sins.
After all, Jews already had a mechanism of forgiveness,
The sacrificial system of the Temple,
And Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement.
When it came to getting your sins forgiven,
Jews in John the Baptist's time had other options
Besides getting baptized in the Jordan River.
The fact that so many Jews resonated with John's message,
And came out to repent and be baptized,
Signals a dissatisfaction, or at least an anxiety among Jews
That somehow the Temple system was not enough.
Prophets only gain a following by preaching a message
That resonates with what people are already feeling.

The people who swarmed the Capitol last year
May have been wrong about the election,
But they were primed for action by those who played on their
Dissatisfaction, their anxiety that the American system was not enough.
When the institutions and traditions that give us comfort and security
Break down and can no longer be trusted,
We are desperate for any alternative.
I don't want to make too much of the comparison between
The followers of John the Baptist and the Capitol rioters.
My point here is simply that John's message must have touched on
Feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety that were already present in society.
This perhaps helps explain why Jews like Jesus came to John.
But Luke reveals that people from all groups of Judean society
Showed up on the muddy banks of that river.
Luke indicates the breadth of John's appeal by marking the presence
Of tax collectors and Roman soldiers.
What a testimony to John's broad appeal,
That among his crowd of followers were not only regular Jews,
But also those who upheld the oppressive and unjust system
Of Roman occupation and taxation of Judea.
Somehow the injustice, the sinfulness of the Roman occupation
Was so apparent in the light of John's teaching,
That the tax collectors and soldiers were present to hear John
Asking them to resist the temptation of power
Granted to them by the structure of occupied society.
To those who manipulated currency and debt
To profit from Roman taxation,

John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you."

This was a radical challenge indeed.

Tax collectors in the Roman world worked on commission,

Collecting extra currency through debt and extortion

In order to pay their Roman masters and make a living on the side.

John's challenge to only collect the amount prescribed

Meant not making a living from the occupation.

It meant that tax collectors essentially needed to quit their jobs.

Even more crucial to the Roman occupation of Judea

Were the Roman soldiers who apparently also sought out John's baptism.

John tells them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats

Or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Luke's readers were familiar with Roman soldiers and the tax system.

So Luke didn't need to explain what John's instructions really meant.

But because we're here on a different continent 2000 years later,

We might need some context to understand what John is saying.

In order to maintain supremacy over its colonies,

The Roman Empire stationed soldiers to enforce Roman law,

And to remind the public who was in charge.

These soldiers were paid in silver coins, known as denarii,

Equivalent to the value of a day's work for a soldier.

But what if the occupied population wouldn't accept those denarii?

What if they resisted Roman rule by refusing to accept Roman silver?

Rome's solution to this problem was simple.

Roman taxes could only be paid with Roman coins,

Which meant that tax collectors' business was conducted in denarii,

And that Judean people had to do business with Roman soldiers

To get the denarii to pay their taxes.
It wouldn't be surprising if a certain number of Roman soldiers
Abused their power and privilege, extorting money from Judeans
And seeking to enrich themselves at Judeans' expense.
So John's instruction to the soldiers not to extort,
And to be satisfied with their wages,
Was essentially telling these soldiers to undermine
The economic aspect of Roman oppression,
To refuse to participate in an unjust system.
Luke suggests that John's critique of Judean society
Was powerful enough to reveal the reality of injustice
Even to those whose job was to perpetrate injustice.
Occupied Judean society was so broken,
Its institutions, including Jewish law, so unsatisfactory to the people,
That hundreds of them sought out a radical preacher,
Clothed in the animal skins of a nomad,
And let him dunk them in the muddy waters of the Jordan.
But not only the victims of injustice were baptized.
Even the guilty, those who extorted and threatened and terrified,
Even they were convicted in the light of John's words
To repent of their participation in propping up an unjust system.
When a society rots, the stench reaches every nostril.
When injustice is normalized,
When we stop smelling the oppression,
When we become accustomed to the stench of dehumanization,
That is when the river calls out to us to be washed clean.
That is when we need a John the Baptist

To not only invite us into repentance for the forgiveness of sins,
But also to call us to bear fruit worthy of that forgiveness.
The Baptist calls us to refuse to participate in oppressive systems,
He calls us to not only feel challenged, but to be challenged,
To jeopardize our comfortable place in society's hierarchy,
So that whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none,
And whoever has food must do likewise.
John the Baptist calls us into a radical reimagining of how society works,
And demands that our actions reflect that new imagining.
John's call is to reaffirm our humanity,
By humbly addressing our human flaws through repentance,
And by resisting the forces that reward us
For denying the humanity of others.
In a sense then, the Gospel of John the Baptist, his good news,
Was to let people know they were not alone
In sensing that something was wrong with their society, religion included.
When John provided an alternative,
People from all walks of life came out to be baptized.
The song that I'm going to share with you reflects that sense
That there is something broken about the way we live,
And that we are desperate for an alternative to corruption and violence.
Like all the songs I will share with you in this series,
I don't intend for this song to be
A perfect match for the sermon or the scripture.
I'm not saying that this 21st Century song
Captures John's message perfectly.
My goal with this series is to find songs from our time and place,

Which reflect some aspect of the stories Luke is telling.
Importantly, these songs are secular, not church songs.
Therefore they may not sound like what you're used to hearing in church.
But I'm hoping they will enhance the message of each sermon,
Or at the very least just be good songs.
The song I'm sharing today is called "Ain't No Reason" by Brett Dennen.
Here it is.