

Title: *Making a way to the River's Edge*

Matthew 3:1-11

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.¹¹ ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Isaiah 11:1-9 – Jenna & Faith

Jenna: A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Faith: ² The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³

Jenna: ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Faith: ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

Jenna: ⁸The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens, the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.

Faith: ⁹ Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I. John is a different kind of preacher – his Sunday best is camel’s hair and a leather belt, the exact same outfit Elijah wore eight hundred years before him. His hair and his beard look like they have rarely been cut and, on a steady diet of locusts and wild honey, he is skinny as a cactus. Surely this strange look is a prophetic message of some kind, perhaps lost to us now, but not to those two millennia ago. Perhaps it is a symbolic act of rejecting the wealth of this world, or perhaps he is making it clear that he is not a prophet aligned with the current system of government or the temple; perhaps he is just trying to reconnect people’s imaginations to Elijah, the greatest prophet of their history. John was a messenger – foretold by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God.¹

His whole thing, it seemed to work, because he clearly drew a crowd. He was so well-known that people went out of their way to find him. He was not a street evangelist, standing on a milk-crate in the middle of the busiest intersection in Jerusalem. He was out in the wilderness and people came to see him: either the stories of him were so legendary and bizarre that people said, “I must go see this wild man for myself,” or people were so hungry for something new, something of substance, something to reconnect them to their God, that they would borrow their neighbor’s donkey to ride out and seek John in the wilderness.

He spoke of one who was coming – he did not have many details – he did not know the name of the one coming or what they would look like; he did not know whether to watch the sky or the earth – if they would arrive by chariot of fire or come more incognito, only found by those who were seeking them. John only knew that the old world was about to end and a new world

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor offers this portrayal of John the Baptist in her sermon, “Waiting in the Dark.”

was spinning toward him, carried in the arms of God's chosen one. It was a world that would be built out of new materials, not the rearranged stones of an old religion.

It seems that John knew that much of the religion happening in the temple was no longer Spirit-lead, so God sent John far from the temple, out in the wilderness, where the air was sharp and clean, out under the stars where one could be free to be who God had called them to be – not a priest keeping all in order, but a prophet in camel's hair calling people to repent, to turn around from how they were living, and be on the look-out for a one who would come after him.

It was time to get ready. He was to prepare a way. To help open people's minds and hearts, to help crack them open ever so slightly, so they might be receptive to God moving in a new way. People were drawn to him. Because of who he was. Because of the message he spoke. Because of what he offered them – a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were holy and pure and start over again, by allowing him to wash them in the Jordan river. The bath was his own idea. There were not any rules about how it was supposed to be done. The rabbis had not okayed it. It was something John offered those who came to him – even women, who were not allowed in the inner precincts of the temple; even well-known sinners, who would not have dreamed of setting foot in the temple. John's baptism bypassed the temple and all its rites. He made a way, he made a track, not for himself, but for the one to come.

II. Olive Schreiner was a South African author, anti-war campaigner and intellectual who most of us have not heard of. It is said that she was a feminist before there was such a term, and that she was an anti-apartheid advocate, before we knew of an anti-apartheid movement.

She wrote and reflected much on God's creation, "If you look at creation long enough" she believed, "creation will speak back to you." In creation one will learn about how God created things to be. One of the tales that Olive Schreiner told was about a young girl who one day went out to a small river, and as she looked at the river she saw some locusts making their way to the river – the first locust got to the river and was swept downstream – and a second one got in and was also swept downstream. But then another and another and another come until they are eventually enough of them, that they are able to form a bridge to the other side of the river with their bodies – making a way for all to cross to the other side.²

The little girl, thinking about what she had seen, asked an elder in her village, "I have been watching these locusts and noticed that some of them got swept down the river. What happens to the ones that didn't make it, the ones that got swept away by the river?"

And the elder said, "There will always be those who make a track to the river's edge, ones who do not make it to the other side, but they took us to the river's edge. We get to the other side, but we would not have made it without those who first made a track to the river – who helped make a way."

There is always someone who must first make a way, who must prepare the way, one who must first make a track to the river's edge for us. Those who make a track to the river are often forgotten by history, it often the next people who are remembered, those who help take the final steps across the river. Often those who made the way, they are forgotten or devalued. John the

² Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III tells this story in his sermon at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Prayer Breakfast in 2015.

Baptist was one who made such a track – one who prepared the way for the one who was following behind him – one who laid aside his own agenda for God’s agenda.

Let me tell you a bit about another one who made a track to the River’s Edge, Dr. Vernon Johns, who was the predecessor to our greatest contemporary prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.³ We remember Martin Luther King, Jr., but the one who made a way for him is largely forgotten to American history.

Vernon Johns grew-up in that segregated period in Virginia, but he wanted to go up north to go to school, so he applied for Oberlin College. He knew that he didn’t have the credits to get into the school because, in those days, young African Americans could only go to school about 4 months out of the year because they had to pick cotton the rest of the year. And so he did not have the adequate credits to get accepted into a prestigious school like Oberlin. So, the story goes that he boarded a train in order to arrive at Oberlin about the same time as his application, saying that “if they deny me, it will have to be to my face.”

So he went to the dean’s office and said he was there to begin his education. The dean was a bit flustered, and flipped through his files until he found the one for Vernon Johns. He said, well, we have your application, but we were going to deny you because you do not have the needed credit.

Legend has it that Vernon Johns, being quick on his feet, asked the dean, “Do you want someone with brains or someone with credits?”

The dean did not appreciate this, and so he said, “well son, if you are going to be a student here, you have to be able to read Greek fluently.”

³ This story of Rev. Dr. Vernon Johns also comes from Otis Moss III.

So, Vernon scanned the shelves in the dean's office until he found a book written in Greek. Then he pulled it down and read it, without mistake, for he had taught himself Greek.

After seeing this the dean said, "well, that is nice, but you also have to be able to read Hebrew to attend Oberlin."

And so, Vernon scanned the shelves again until he found a Hebrew book, which he too could read fluently. A few years later, Vernon Johns graduated second in his class at Oberlin. Eventually, after a few other stops along the way, Dr. Johns became the pastor at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

He was known to be a phenomenal preacher – the first black preacher to have a sermon published alongside the sermons of white preachers in the annual review, "Best Sermon of the Year."⁴ And he was controversial – he pushed his congregations. He had sermon titles like: "Is Heaven Segregated?" And "It is safe to murder negroes in Montgomery."

History tells us that on the Saturday night before he preached the sermon, "It is safe to murder negroes in Montgomery", upon seeing this title written on the marquee in front of Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, he was arrested – arrested for his title. As the Rev. Otis Moss III says, "You have to be a bad preacher to get arrested the night before you preach your sermon!"

The sheriff brought him in and wanted to know what he was going to say in that sermon, worried that such a sermon might be dangerous and cause a conflict in his city. As the story goes, Dr. Johns took off his hat and turned it upside down and said, "well now, I am a Baptist preacher, so I can tell you what I am going to preach on, but first I have to take an offering."

⁴ The year of this publication was 1926.

Every single Sunday he was always challenging his congregation to make a way for the next generation, to participate in the work of God's transformation. He was always challenging them, a congregation largely made up of middle and upper-middle class people, to stand up for liberation and for justice – to not stand-by or be happy with the fact that things were better than they had been, but to be agents of God's liberation – to be a people who make a way to the river's edge.

His prophetic words and calls to action often upset his conservative congregation. Eventually, the deacons of the church put him out, he lasted only five years there. They were tired of his style, always pushing them and pushing them. And so the Deacons put him out. And they said, the next time we are going to get a young pastor who we can mold and shape – who does not push us toward action so hard. And then they called Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be their next pastor.

There is always someone who makes a way for us. Who helps to prepare for a future, even a future for which they don't have the entire picture – even if they don't know exactly what or for whom they are preparing for...they only have a glimpse of the future, a vision of what the future could be, hope of how things might be. And so we attend to our part faithfully, unsure exactly what will come after us – unsure who might follow us and pick-up the work which will never be completed in our lifetime.

III. I wonder how many more people would have missed Jesus and his upside-down message if it wasn't for John. Most people did miss Jesus – most were not ready for a Messiah who ate with

Gentiles, who hung-out with tax-collectors, who touched the unclean, and lifted up the value of women. We know most were not ready for him. But how many more might have missed him and his message if John had not already begun to shake things up; if John had not already made the people consider that perhaps God is moving out into the wilderness beyond the temple; if John had not already begun to make them think about their patriarchal separations when he offered baptism to both men and women alike; if John had not already helped to break people open just a bit; if John had not already called them to self-examination. How many more might have thought Jesus too radical to listen to, if John had not first put on camel's hair and preached like a wild man in the wilderness – perhaps Jesus even looked moderate compared to some of what John was doing and saying. How many more might have chosen not to follow if Jesus, if it had not been for John first making a way, making a way to the river's edge – preparing us to hear a new and world-changing message – preparing us to be on the look-out for God to start something totally new.

John did not know exactly who he was making a way for, but he stayed faithful to his own calling: he spoke the words that God gave him; he lived an odd and peculiar life – perhaps not knowing exactly what difference (if any) it would make, only knowing that this is what the Spirit of God was calling him to do. He spoke a message most had not heard before, and it cost him dearly. He went to the wilderness, not because it was easy, but because that is where God had led him. He offered baptism, because that is what people needed.

He made a way to the river's edge of a new future, even though he did not exactly know what that future would look like. He attended to his part – he laid aside his own agenda, perhaps

even his own desire for greatness, to surrender his own agenda to God's agenda. To be on God's side, rather than hoping that God was on his side.

³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." '

IV: May we, like John, make a way to the river's edge; may we be a people who help to open people's minds and hearts just a crack to the transformative and incomprehensible love of God; may we be a people who prepare for a beautiful and unknown future – a future which we do not see clearly, but for which we have great hope – a future which "will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." Amen and amen.