

Men's Night – December 2022
Ephesians 5:1-33
Matthew 3:1-12

Nobody cuddles up with John the Baptist. I joined the Navy in late 1986 and was shipped off to Naval Recruit Center San Diego and experienced a severe change of lifestyle. Bootcamp; someone at bootcamp was charged to transform my demeanor. My new demeanor was to fit my new vocation. This individual was to take a relatively soft college graduate who was entitled and arrogant and turn him into a hardened sailor who had a military bearing. The company commander was a senior chief and he was not a nice man. He was mean. He was highly demanding. He was a living terror for us recruits. For ten weeks we never escaped this man. It was not his job to be nice. He was supremely devoted to his vocation – to take 100 raw recruits and hammer into them a warrior's disposition.

We are very close to one of the most elite military bases in the world, where warriors are trained. The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, also known as 29 Palms, is the largest United States Marine Corps base. Enhanced combat training is a way of life at 29 Palms. Why? Because life is precious – one needs to function well in a combat situation to accomplish the goal, to achieve the mission, to safeguard life – one's own and one's allies' lives. Marine bootcamp beats you down and forces you to rely on your fellow Marines. Bootcamp teaches you not to think of yourself but of the unit in order to protect life and craft an effective fighting force. If Pee Wee Herman was your company commander your outfit would be on a fast track to 100 caskets. If Richard Simmons was the bootcamp drill sergeant then your outfit would be of no use to anybody.

John the Baptist was supremely devoted to his vocation. He was sent by God to prepare the way. Long had God planned to send His Son. The way was to be prepared, *people* were to be prepared, and John the Baptist was the instrument through whom God would accomplish His goal – that men like us would be prepared to receive His Son aright. This is what the Gospel according to John says about the Baptist: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:6-9).

The prophet Isaiah had foretold the coming of the Baptist. “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight’” (Isaiah 40:3). John was unmistakable in his pronouncements. “Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand.” John was stern. No one snuggles up with John the Baptist – he puts you on edge. He does this deliberately. He puts you on edge in order to prepare the way. John is not nice. He is wild. His appearance is alarming. His words are alarming. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). Judgment; God's judgment approaches and good fruit is what He expects. The axe of finality is laid to the roots and there will be no negotiations with the axe. Fire awaits those who reject God's kingdom, who reject God's Christ, who refuse to repent.

John was doing *precisely* what he was called to do. Men like us were going out to him to be baptized, to be washed of their sin, because they were eager to be prepared. John's alarming voice stirred men like us from their spiritual complacency. John's voice and his call to repentance had the internal mark of authenticity. Those who heard his preaching recognized the authority in his voice – and it was not his own authority, it was God's. We hear Him today for God still speaks His Word today, through the Scriptures. You and I know authenticity when we hear it. When the Baptizer calls us to repent, you and I don't have to look far find something that is not right in us, our behavior, our thoughts. Repentance and faith is the rhythm of our lives. We know our hope is in Christ alone, His blood alone. The law does its work in us. It cuts us and we are exposed, justly wounded, unable to dress our mortal lacerations. In mercy, as He always intended, God binds our wounds. Christ's righteousness is our triage, our medicine, our dressing. He suffered, didn't He? Your sin, my sin, was His laceration, His crucifixion, and His death. He was judged in your stead. He stood in your place and suffered your punishment and He extends to you His righteousness. You are forgiven, redeemed, delivered from sin and death. Thanks be to God; we are prepared for the Lord's return. We hearken to His voice, we know His grace, we know His cross, His empty tomb, and His Gospel.

How many of you believed that you have been changed? Who changed you? Do you have a Christian bearing? Where did that come from? I believe that I have been changed with my whole heart. Okay, so how are we prepared to be husbands? John prepares us to receive Christ aright by calling us to repentance; what is it that prepares us to be good husbands, to keep our marital vow? Didn't you say words very much like these: "I take you to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy will; and I pledge you my faithfulness." Is that a vow that you take seriously? What helps you be that man? What prepares you to be that husband?

"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Women are often an enigma, a riddle, a mystery. Has your wife ever been a source of bewilderment for you? Do you believe that you understand totally her motivations, her impulses, her secret thoughts and hidden desires? Do you believe, as I do, that it is a privilege that God gives us, to endeavor to love as Christ loved, to extend Christ's love to our women, to selflessly serve them, to protect, defend, and honor them? But where do we learn how to be the men that God has called us to be? How do we learn to love our wives as Christ loved the church? We listen to the Gospel. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Hearing the Gospel is exactly what leads you to be a Christlike husband. Did the Lord die for you because you were so decent, so lovable, so constant in virtue? Do you think that we are called to love our wives when it is easy and treat them shabbily when they deserve it? Is that what Christ has done to you?

He searched for you. He doggedly pursued you, day and night, to bring you into His Kingdom, to breath into you the Spirit of faith, the love of His sacrifice, the sanctity of His very person. When you were dead in trespasses and sins, God made you alive in Christ, it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:5). You are Christ to your wife. You love her like He has loved you. What a calling! What a privilege! Faith comes alive in your home when you love your wife as Christ loved the church. This kind of love is masculine. It is strong, confident. When we bear our crosses, we do not bear them alone. He is always with us. When we love, when we

fail to love, we are never alone. He works through us to will and to act according to His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). When we fail, we confess it to our women and to Christ. He forgives us, He strengthens us, He renews us. His love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8). May He strengthen us all, teach us to love as He loves, and may we be a great blessing to the women around us. To God alone be the glory.