

## Matthew 3

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This 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.’”

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do 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. <sup>10</sup>Even now the ax 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.

<sup>11</sup>“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. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

## Matthew 11 - Messengers from John the Baptist

<sup>2</sup> When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

### Jesus Praises John the Baptist

<sup>7</sup> As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup> From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup> For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; <sup>14</sup> and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!

<sup>16</sup> “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

<sup>17</sup> ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

<sup>18</sup> For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup> the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

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**Matthew 3: 1-12; Matthew 11: 2-19**

**“Cousins”**

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My parents are both only children, therefore, I did not grow up with cousins. Sure, there were a few distant relations that we saw occasionally. But they were anomalies. I didn't really know any of them well. There was Carolyn who played the flute and became a United Methodist pastor. There was Jeanette who thought it would be fun for us to be pen-pals for a short time. But I have no real “cousin” stories to tell. My grandparents only had my sister and me to dote on, and that they did, at times with grandiosity.

For my kids, it's a different story. They know my sister's daughter Evie, and Chuck's brother's three kids pretty well. We've been on vacations together. We've stayed at each other's houses. We alternate among the various family gatherings throughout the holidays. For better, and sometimes for worse, they've had the chance to experience extended family that's not the same group of people they have to live with every day. Which always brings up some interesting conversations on how the rest of the family can be “like us” but then again “not like us.”

A perfect scenario, right? Cousins are people, often close in age, who are required to be friends with you. And initially it seems nice - shared video games, rounds of playing Barbies, finding treasures in Grandma's attic, goofing around in the yard, even helping with chores at the grandparents' homes. But there always seems to come a time when one cousin gets tired of another and will make some claim about who can “go home” now. At least that's what's happened in our tribe. As they age up, the ability to keep tongues in check is getting better, but

maybe the fuses are getting shorter. Who are these people again? And why do I have to see them several times a year? Wouldn't it just be better if we stayed home or they went home?

They aren't anything LIKE us. Their rules are different. Their attitudes are different. Their clothes are different. Their choices are WAY different. And then the contrasts start showing up. We live in a city. They live in the country. We go to public school. They homeschool. We have loose guidelines. They have non-negotiable structure. And so it goes. The debriefing of the visit begins even before the doors get shut for the car ride home.

But don't get me wrong. These are the very people that we love and cherish and make time in our busy schedules to see. If there was abuse, or emotional toxicity, or true intolerance, we might be making different choices about spending time with extended family. No, these are descriptions of the basic annoyances, the differences, the wide variety of opposites that come from passing family expectations from one generation to the next and that are interpreted differently as each sibling then starts his or her own family. What one child holds on to as important, another might react against, and it was that way for me and my sister, and for Chuck and his brother, and it will be that way as my two kids someday have families of their own. They are different. Their families will be different. And should there be cousins – they will make their own paths as well. Some cousin of the future surely will be told in no uncertain terms, to go home when the other one has had enough.

So here we are today reading stories about a relationship between cousins - Jesus and John. These cousins draw upon long standing family traditions. Mary and Elizabeth come from priestly families where the stories of the law and the prophets were well known. Joseph's heritage can be traced to the Davidic line, and peppered through that line are some real characters, biblical misfits and wild women who challenged the status quo. We have Matthew to

thank for his effort to establish the genealogy, and we have Luke to thank for introducing us to the kinship between Mary and Elizabeth.

It makes me wonder. Did Jesus and John grow up together? Did they play games, go fishing, and get in trouble with their over-protective mothers? Did they build things together in Joseph's wood shop? Did they fight? Did they, from a young age, start differentiating their two such intertwined lives so that they could each make their own way?

These stories talk about how different they are, but clearly, they are each proud of the other. John says about Jesus, "I am not worthy to carry his sandals." And Jesus says about John, "Among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." John is known for his ascetic lifestyle, eating only locusts and wild honey, and wearing atrocious clothing made from camel's hair. Jesus came, as they say, eating and drinking – so much so that some accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. John was the wild man, Jesus the civilized teacher. John was a messenger and a prophet; Jesus was a healer who cured the blind and lame, cleansed the lepers, brought the dead back to life, and blessed the poor with good news.

They couldn't be more different – and yet they were much the same – the family resemblance is profound, even if their expressions of the family traditions go radically in different directions. They were both preaching repentance, challenging the self-righteously religious, calling the regular person to a life of justice and a commitment to mercy. John opened the way in the wilderness for his cousin Jesus, and Jesus honored the prophetic craziness that his cousin bore witness to in his life.

Both had much to say about the world in which they lived, and to the people that were feeling broken, abused, and forsaken by God. And yet, to many, neither of them came across

particularly well. John calls out the “brood of vipers” in the church that had become so much about gatekeeping that they had forgotten how to love. That didn’t make him very popular. Then Jesus heals and blesses at all the wrong times and with all the wrong people. So, the authorities didn’t like him much either. And Jesus has a perfectly apt metaphor for what that feels like. He says, about this generation of people who are longing for something more, that they are like children in the marketplace, shouting to one another, “We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

I get it. The critiques of spiritual leaders are many. Some are well deserved. And yet, we often simply miss the point. We fail to celebrate when a celebration is called for. And we fail to shed tears when the children cry out for relief. It’s too easy to point at one leader’s denial of worldly pleasures as crazy, or one leader’s embracing of worldly pleasures as indulgent. John and Jesus can’t win with these crowds. So perhaps it was good that each had a yin to their yang, that they were so completely opposite – and yet were bringing nearly identical messages to the world they learned how to cherish and see as God’s own from the earliest times in each of their upbringings.

It was a time, not so different from our time, when spiritual leaders were called upon to be boldly prophetic and gracious with their healing touch. We need both kinds of cousins, both kinds of righting of the wrongs of our world. We need our own spiritual family traditions to hold fast in what feels like an apocalyptic time. I love what Nadia Bolz-Weber has shared in her Advent preaching about the word apocalypse though. It’s reclaimed that word for me. She reminds me of the word’s origins in saying that “apo” means “un” and “calypse” comes from the word for cover. An apocalypse is an uncovering. Jesus and John were about the uncovering going on in their own time. They were uncovering the deadly truth that their beloved religion had

become infested with vipers. They were uncovering that a restoration to health and well-being was desperately needed. They were uncovering that people didn't even know anymore if they should laugh or cry. They uncovered the need for repentance and made way for the Holy Spirit's baptism by fire. These cousins unleashed their particular strengths on the world, and we still feel the impact of their teaching yet today.

Learning from those "like us" but really not "like us" and being able to appreciate our common values – even when the differences drive us crazy – might help us appreciate that John made way for Jesus, and Jesus gave credit to John. And our families may just benefit from the ways in which we aren't all alike. Thank God for that. Amen.