

Good morning everyone. It's great to be back home after two weeks in Northern India on a vision trip that included Charlie Gregory and Colleen Nguyen from our Foster City Campus. Thank you for your prayers. We had an amazing time and you will hear more about the incredible ways God is working in Northern India. I think I am still jet lagged. At 5:00 this morning I was wide awake craving a beef steak dinner.

It's good to get back home with our CPC staff. I was proud to learn how they organized and mobilized this "Fill a Truck Campaign." These tragic fires give us another opportunity, another unique way to let our Bay Area community know we care.

A few weeks ago we attended a conference together in Southern California. And one evening we had some free time so we piled into the van and hunted down a store that almost everyone on the staff wanted to go to. It was called **He is greater than I**. Maybe you recognize their brand.

Some of us were calling home to get shirt sizes. Most of us got tee shirts. I think one of us got sunglasses with the **He is greater than I** logo. I guess I was a tightwad because all I wanted to buy was a \$5 wristband. There is a scripture reference that goes with **He is greater than I**. It's John 3:30. It is a quote by a pretty well known man. His name? John the Baptist. And here is what he said about Jesus: *"He must become greater; I must become less"* (John 3:30).

So what makes a person great? Is someone great because they were born into a famous family? Is someone great because they have earned a lot of money? Is someone great because they made it into the hall of fame in their particular sport or industry?

John the Baptist had none of the worldly marks of greatness. Yet, Jesus called John the greatest man who had ever lived. *"I tell you the truth: Among those born of a woman there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist"* (Matt. 11:11). John the Baptist was greater than Noah, Abraham, Jacob or Joseph, Moses, Elijah, David, any king, philosopher or military leader in the history of the world.

Why was John considered great? Because God used John to point people to the greatest one—His own Son, and their Messiah, Jesus Christ. John was great because his ethics, his words, and his ministry all said, "He is greater than I."

Our big idea this morning is: The great one prepared the world for the greatest One, who will establish His Kingdom for all people. Let's look closer in Matthew 3 at this man who Jesus said was the greatest of all time.

The Message of John the Baptist

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (verses 1-2)

By this time in history, the last great prophets of old—Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi—had long disappeared from the scene. It was as if God had been silent for 400 years. And in that time God's people continued to cry out for God's mercy and deliverance, but they had to wonder if God had finally said, Enough with you people, I wash my hands of you all!

And suddenly John appears on the scene. Matthew says very little about John's background because Matthew's Jewish audience likely already knew a lot about him. If you were privileged enough to have seen him in person, he would leave an impression one would never forget. He explodes into our story out of a remote desert region like Elijah of old. His message was a fearless and unequivocal call to repentance.

John was an ascetic. He was also a Jew, but he wasn't a Pharisee or a Sadducee; he was likely an Essene. Essenes would often cloister together in remote areas. They were separatists who pulled out of society around two major beliefs. First, they believed that the world was going to end soon, and second, they needed to wait it out by separating themselves from corrupt Roman culture and, just as bad in their thinking, the corrupt Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day. John called both sides out because of their corruption. John wasn't your typical soft and cuddly pastor; he was prickly and confrontational. I doubt he got many invites for pie with the pastor after Sunday night church service!

The Essenes were obsessed with staying pure, and they demonstrated that by taking daily ritual baths to symbolize spiritual cleansing and purifying. Washing in these baths, helped the Essenes stay focused on staying unspoiled by the corruption they saw both outside and inside the church.

So this use of water as a symbol for cleansing for religious purposes was built into John early in his life. Many of the most strict Essenes lived west of the Dead Sea in a remote and harsh desert called the Qumran. This region is famous not just for the Essenes, but because the earliest still existent manuscripts of parts of our Bible were discovered in caves near by in the middle of the 20th century. These manuscripts are called the Dead Sea scrolls. I visited the Qumran region on a July day and the temperature was 112 degrees in the shade. John was a severe guy from a severe place, and he had a severe message.

At some point God called John to a public ministry. But for John, his pulpit became the Jordan River, and his sanctuary was the

desert. From the desert of Judah, John preached a two-point message. His first point was a demand. John demanded personal repentance. The word repent in the Greek literally means to change one's own mind and actions, and to be sorry for something. But if we look at the ancient Hebrew meaning the word gets personal. Not only does repentance mean to be sorry and to change one's own mind, it means to turn the opposite way and practice behaviors in new ways that honor God. And these new ways are called the fruit of repentance.

The second point of John's message was a warning. John warned them that they had better repent because the kingdom of God literally was arriving right before their eyes. The king is coming and he deserves and requires nothing less than repentance. Matthew uses the phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven" 32 times in his gospel. Luke and Mark use "Kingdom of God" to mean the same thing. But Matthew's sensitivity to his Jewish audience knew good Jews out of reverence would not speak out loud God's name and so they would substitute the word "heaven" for the word "God."

After centuries of silence this idea of a new prophet, a new message of a new Kingdom of Heaven arriving caught fire. There was a hunger, a yearning for someone, anyone, to come and bring justice, renew their world and make everything right again. No doubt, people came up from Jerusalem to hear this powerful and compelling preacher and they asked, "Who are you John? Really, who are you?" Matthew tells us that John is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 40:3:

"This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (v. 3)

The people familiar with Isaiah's prophecy were seeing what was about to happen as a fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams. God is coming to them as God came for his people in Moses' day and rescued them through the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. That all their years of hard labor will soon be over, and their sins will be forgiven and they too are will pass through another kind of water and be released from captivity and be saved.

It's ironic—John an ascetic, didn't preach that salvation comes through an ascetic life. He preached that salvation comes through a King who will soon arrive. John is preparing the path for Jesus himself to claim his Kingdom. This Kingdom of Heaven isn't a defined space of Promised Land with borders on a map that one crosses into. This Kingdom of Heaven is crossing into a new life through the King and Messiah, the Lord, Jesus Christ.

The imagery is beautiful. John saw himself as preparing the King's Highway for him. Not to literally clear roads or fill potholes so the king could travel, but to clear men and women's hearts of obstacles and potholes that keep the King who saves away from them. Repentance of sin makes the road to our heart straight and smooth, a road fit for a king.

The Ministry of John the Baptist

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing

their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (verses 4-6)

John must have looked strange to anyone who saw him. He didn't live, dress, or eat like any religious leaders they had seen. He didn't fit the suit. He lived, dressed, and ate like the prophet Elijah who is said to reappear before the Day of the Lord as described in Malachi 4:5. Later, we will see that Jesus identifies John as a type of "Elijah." His appearance said to the religious leaders, "I am not taken in by your religion, your burdens you lay on people, because those are crooked paths that don't lead to new life with the King." And the people came to the desert to hear John. They came for his fresh message. They came for truth. They came because in spite of all their religion they yearned for something real. Could it be that it is in the desert—when life is tough, severe, when we are extended beyond our own resources—that we actually seek God? That it's in the desert where we actually find God?

The only baptisms that these Jews had seen were the rare baptisms that happened when Gentiles converted to Judaism. Now John is saying be baptized just like the Gentiles. Commentators tell us that thousands of people went out to the desert and were publicly renouncing their sins and being baptized by John. The people were looking for something real, something that could save them, something that could relieve them of their guilt and shame. They were looking for life. They were looking for Good News. They were looking for the power of God in their lives.

In India we heard faith stories of many new believers. We heard from a former witch doctor whose own daughter got sick and his spells couldn't heal her, but Christians prayed and his daughter was healed and so he became a believer. We heard from a woman who was possessed by seven demons and she was delivered and now she leads a house church. We heard story after story where medicine didn't heal but God did.

The other pastor on our team and I were privileged to be asked to help out with a baptism on Thursday afternoon. I was told that some of these believers came to faith because God had done a miracle that their Hindu gods didn't do. Some came to faith through visions and dreams, while others came to faith by hearing the preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified. So we showed up to this baptism and I was thinking on a Thursday afternoon, maybe 5-6 people would be there. When we got there we heard singing in a room and we went into this oppressively hot building and sitting on the floor singing with all their hearts were 200 people ready to be baptized. I will never forget that long line of men and women who were changed by the power of Christ standing in that hot sun waiting their turn to be baptized by me. I will never forget the sight and the feeling of joy I had to baptize 200 brand new believers on a Thursday afternoon in Northern India.

Not everyone who went out to the desert to listen to John's preaching wanted to take his message into their hearts. We have seen John's message and John's ministry, now we see John's conviction.

The Conviction of John the Baptist

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (verses 7-10)

We get the idea that John wasn't trying to make friends with religious leaders. He calls them a brood, literally an inbred bunch who exclude and deceive. People think you are harmless, but you are poison. The reference to vipers paints a picture of a small poisonous snake that lives in the desert that looks like a small stick. People pick it up because they think it is something good like firewood, but they are deceived by the viper and they get bit.

There is another picture here. Wrath is associated with fire. It was understood that when a farmer burned the stalks in his field at the end of the harvest, vipers would slither out of the field trying to escape the fire. These religious leaders thought they could slither to safety, but the only escape from wrath was through heart-felt repentance.

The Messiah, Jesus Christ, is already discerning who belongs to him, no matter whether they are a descendant of Abraham or not. John is saying to all of us, "The Kingdom is dawning and so is the judgment. To paraphrase John's message, "Hey religious person, do you think your pedigree is enough to save you? Do you think your church attendance is enough? Do you think your tally of good works will outweigh your tally of bad works is enough? What matters is what we really think and believe about God and about ourselves. That is the fruit of repentance. Real repentance leads to mourning over our sin. Repentance leads to spiritual conviction and deeper trust in the promises of God, Repentance leads to surrender to God. Repentance leads to kneeling before God and not before other gods of this world. Repentance leads to ending the futile chasing after God's favor. Repentance leads to the understanding that without repentance we become whitewashed tombs that appear clean on the outside but are actually dead on the inside."

It's important for us to understand that repentance leads to joy. Repentance leads to relief. We no longer have to carry a burden by trying to hide from God, or justify ourselves before God, or blame our sin on how others treated us so poorly. Repentance keeps us accountable for our own sins and also prevents us from judging others without self examination first.

True repentance leads to deep relational healing. There is always a face and a person we hurt when we sin, and repentance starts the reconciliation and peacemaking process. And there is always another person waiting to welcome us as we repent and come back home. But for all John's greatness here, John can't take us all the way home. He does his job by revealing our need but now admits that his message is lacking in the power department. So this great man points to the one man who is greater than he.

This Great Man Reveals the One Greater than He

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (v. 11)

He is telling them there will come a day when they will not have to live by their own power, but by the power of God. Jesus said to his followers, "*When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power*" (Acts 1:8).

This "baptized with the Holy Spirit" speaks of a day the prophet Joel spoke about when he said that God would pour out his Spirit on all mankind. God said through the prophet Ezekiel that he would, "*sprinkle clean water on them and give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them*" (Ezk. 36:25-26). And when the Holy Spirit baptizes, he will not only give you power, the Spirit will also come like a fire to purify and refine us. As metal is purified by fire, so God promises to purify us and cleanse our lives of whatever impurities are not pleasing to him.

A good question for all of us to ask is: *Are we bold enough and trusting enough to ask God to burn away everything in our lives that prevents us from being who he wants us to be, and doing what he wants us to do?* Full disclosure: When he uses fire, we will feel the heat. Fire can hurt. And this kind of fire makes us clean; it burns away impurities, it melts all the junk that blocks us from the deepest kind of relationship with Christ. It removes those things that we think we cannot live without. This refining fire is God's perfect will for all of us. So I challenge all of us to pray this difficult prayer: "God, burn away everything in my life that prevents me from being all you want me to be." And hold tight to him and hold on to others in community who love you and love Jesus. God is pleased with these kinds of prayers.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (verses 11-12)

The coming Messiah will be like a farmer who threshes the wheat to separate the wheat from the chaff on the threshing floor. And the Messiah like the farmer would toss us into the air and the wind would blow the chaff away and leave the wheat to be gathered and put in the barn, leaving the rest to be burned. This is wonderful news for those who repented, those who want to be rescued from whatever exile and spiritual bondage they were experiencing. This is wonderful news because those who repent can look forward with hope to the day they will be gathered into the barn with the others who repented. But John's message also describes a terrible day of judgment ahead for those who don't repent and receive this Good News of new life in Christ. And while John was preparing everyone for the arrival of Jesus, Jesus arrives. Our greatest hope for the world takes center stage.

This Great Man Reveals Our Great Hope

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (verses 13-15)

Did Jesus need to repent? Did Jesus need to confess sin? No. John understood that better than anyone. What did Jesus mean by getting baptized to fulfill all righteousness? In Jesus' baptism by John, Jesus identifies himself with our fallen sinful humanity and then fulfills his commitment to fulfill all righteousness by placing his righteousness in us. He fulfills all righteousness by becoming the perfect substitute sacrifice to die in our place for our sins and purchase God's righteousness to come and live in us.

Jesus had to identify with our humanity, our suffering, and our death, so that through his death and resurrection we can now identify with his resurrection after death and God's presence and power and love in our lives today. Baptism is not about sprinkling or dunking, it's about who we identify with. When we are baptized as Christians, God allows us to identify with Jesus' death and resurrection so that his death becomes **our** death and his resurrection becomes **our** resurrection. The Kingdom of Heaven will be revealed through his teaching and preaching and healing. But the Kingdom of Heaven will be fully established through his substitutionary death and his resurrection.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (verses 16-17)

What an amazing scene! We have the Father speaking from heaven. We have the Son of God getting baptized. We have the Holy Spirit seen descending on Jesus like a dove. Then the words of the Father "This is my Son" seem to come from Psalm 2 where God declares the Messiah as his Son. And the second part of what the Father says comes from Isaiah 42:1 which says, ***"God the Father delights in this chosen one. And he will put his Spirit on Him and he will bring justice, on all nations as he fulfills all righteousness. He will set captives free, and he will be a light to the Gentiles, hope to all people."***

To the 900 million Hindus in our world, the Ganges River is a sacred place. They believed that the goddess Ganges came in the form of a river to purify the dead. Crematoriums line the Ganges and we saw people bring their dead on stretchers to the crematoriums and we saw human ashes floating on the Ganges. But the river also speaks to the living. Hindus come to the Ganges in annual pilgrimages. The river is also lined with priests who tell the people that if they bathe and drink the water of the Ganges they can purify their lives from bad karma, sins, and even the impurities from previous lives.

I learned there are 30,000 gods in Hinduism who demand but do not love; 30,000 gods who want you to die for them, but not one willing to die for you. One quarter of the world's population lives in India and Nepal. Less than one percent is Christian in this region. Over a billion people with no blessed assurance, no relief

for their sins, no promise of eternal life, no peace because there is no mercy. And for 3500 years they have washed in places like these, in a polluted river with garbage, feces and dead animals and human remains trying to become clean to appease their gods. No Hindu god, no sacred river delivers living water.

As we heard from new Christians the baptism with the Spirit is where the power is. A Hindu washing in the Ganges didn't deliver forgiveness, it didn't deliver freedom. It didn't deliver power to change lives. But the baptism with the Spirit that comes from a relationship with Jesus washes them clean, not with river water but with living water that washes the heart clean.

But for our Christian brothers and sisters in India, the baptism of the Holy Spirit means the spirit of the living God coming into them to truly transform lives. And at their water baptism I saw the joy, I saw the excitement. I couldn't pronounce each of their names very well as I baptized them but I was excited to celebrate their new life in Christ with them.

When we celebrate baptism at CPC we celebrate the living spirit of God indwelling us and making us new that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. We are planning a baptism celebration at our Foster City Campus in January 2018. A sign-up link will go out to you soon. In the meantime you can read about why we celebrate the Christian life with water baptism for those who come to faith in Christ.

This week I asked myself this question; maybe you can relate to this question as well: Have I underestimated the power of the Holy Spirit to change my life? Have I relied on other inspiration, knowledge, effort, and actually stifled the work of the Holy Spirit to refresh me, empower me, simplify and focus my life? Have I given credit to man where credit is due God? Have I called on my own talents first, and God's blessing second?

If you are like me this realization in my own life was a call to confession and repentance and openness to the invisible power of God who lives in me to have his way with me; for the Spirit to fall fresh on me. May John's message point us to celebrate Jesus who baptizes with the Spirit and fire. May what we have learned today increase our dependence and openness for new fresh fillings of God's spirit to impact our marriages, our workplaces, our family relationships, our hearts to share what God has done, a desire to want all that God has for us.

Let our prayer be: "Lord, fill me with your Spirit. I don't want to go my way, I want to go your way. I don't want to live by my power, I want to live my your power. Have your way with me, Lord."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1434-5FC