

East Durham Methodist Circuit:
On-line Service for 10th January 2021

compiled by Jean Shotton and Ashleigh Pritchard

Theme: The call to witness

Call to worship:

This the day that the Lord has made. **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**
We are the family of God. **And are called by God's name.**
We are heirs of Christ's kingdom. **And born of the Spirit.**
Let us, therefore, come together in thanksgiving. **Amen**

Hymn: On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry John Chandler **StF 182 / H&P 84**

1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh:
awake and listen for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.

2 Let every heart be cleansed from sin,
make straight the way for God within,
and so prepare to be the home
where such a mighty guest may come.

3 For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

4 To heal the sick, stretch out your
hand,
and make the fallen sinner stand;
shine out, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

5 To you, O Christ, all praises be,
whose advent sets your people free;
whom with the Father we adore
and Holy Spirit evermore

A Prayer of Approach:

The wonders of creation call out to us Lord, and speak of the glory of your presence. Even the seemingly simple fact of night changing into day proclaims the reality of how you provide for us. When we look at the world, we see so many different examples of people who witness to the truth of your life shared with us. There are radical, challenging people like John the Baptist who haul us out of our comfort zones to acknowledge your Lordship; there are wise and inspiring teachers like Paul who draw us deeper into the truth of living with your life in us.

We bless and praise you Lord, that in your providence you constantly reach out to speak to us. As this year proceeds, help us to listen more closely to the voice of your son Jesus, in the different ways he speaks to us, and help us to respond with deeper faith and trust to His call of love. **Amen.**

A Prayer of Confession:

Lord, when you came into the world, things changed. When we came into a relationship with you, things changed. Life became filled with a new sense of purpose and peace. Lord, sometimes we let you down by doing wrong things or failing to do right things.

We are sorry, Lord.

Sometimes, Lord, through pride, stubbornness or fear we build barriers and keep others at arm's length – even you Lord.

We are sorry, Lord.

At times we give in to our weaknesses and temptations, failing to draw on your strength. At times we are troubled by difficult situations and find it hard to trust you.

We are sorry, Lord.

Help us to turn such things around and turn to you. Help us to learn from the past and, drawing on your strength and peace, make a better future. **Amen.**

An Assurance of forgiveness: O God, when Jesus was baptized, you spoke of your love for him. You showed your love for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. By the power of the cross, the darkness of our wrongdoing is banished by the light of your loving forgiveness.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Let us now say **The Lord's Prayer** together:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Hymn: **When Jesus came to Jordan** Fred Pratt Green **StF 233 / H&P 132**

1. When Jesus came to Jordan to be baptized by John,
He did not come for pardon, but as his Father's Son.
He came to share repentance with all who mourn their sins,
To speak the vital sentence with which good news begins.

2. He came to share temptation, our utmost woe and loss,
For us and our salvation to die upon the cross.
So when the Dove descended on him, the Son of Man,
The hidden years had ended, the age of grace began.

3. Come, Holy Spirit, aid us to keep the vows we make,
This very day invade us, and every bondage break.
Come, give our lives direction, the gift we covet most:
To share the resurrection that leads to Pentecost.

Reading: **Luke 1: 68–79** **Benedictus (The Song of Zechariah)**

- 1 **Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel,** who has come to his people and set them free. ♦
- 2 **He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour,** ♦
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 **Through his holy prophets God promised of old** ♦

to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us,

4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦

and to remember his holy covenant.

5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: ♦

to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦

holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.

7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, ♦

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦

by the forgiveness of all their sins.

9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦

the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, ♦

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

Reading: Mark 1: 4-11 New Revised Standard Version

The Bible passage this week is an important transitioning point in Jesus' life. This is the first time that we meet Jesus as an adult and it's a moment when God focuses upon him in front of the crowds - to make it known that he's really delighted with all that Jesus is and all that he will become in the next stage of his life journey. Both Father and Son are aware of the difficulties that lie ahead:

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased

Hymn: Have you heard God's voice Jacqueline G Jones **StF 662**

1. Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred? Are you still prepared to follow?

Have you made a choice to remain and serve though the way be rough and narrow?

**Will you walk the path that will cost you much and embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you the disciples of tomorrow?**

2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down when the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground when the crowds are turning violent? **Will you...**

3. In your city streets will you be God's heart? Will you listen to the voiceless? Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start, will you share your faith with the faithless? **Will you...**

4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith and believe it could be different? Will you share your views using words of grace? Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?

**We will walk the path that will cost us much and embrace the pain and sorrow?
We will trust in One who entrusts to us the disciples of tomorrow?**

Message: Out of the Wilderness - Speak of Change



John the Baptist

When my local supermarket was being reorganised I walked twice the distance looking for a particular item in the store and was unable to locate it because it had been moved to a different aisle. Even when I asked some of the staff for help, they struggled to locate what I required. If we look in the wrong place, we may not find what we need.

The first verse of Mark's gospel begins with The Baptist. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Today's text is the continuation of the Prophecy spoken by Isaiah in Isaiah 40:3. John the Baptist is the fulfilment of a prophecy that was hundreds of years old.

John was the firstborn child of parents who were "getting on in years," they were part of God's story. From the moment the angel of the Lord had informed his father Zechariah that he was going to have a son, John was dedicated to the Lord.

In his special role, John would not cut his hair, he would live in the wild, he would eat off the land... honey & locusts and dress with whatever he could find to wear. So, when John came to the River Jordan, he was wearing some sort of garment made from a camel skin, he was unshorn and unshaven. His rugged appearance was not what one might expect of a preacher today, but in those days it did inform those who saw John that he was a holy man of God, that he had a message to share.

After urging that all people would do well to put their lives in order, smooth out the rough places, walk the straight and narrow, John quickly focused on what he came to do. He would challenge the *status quo*, challenging people and 'the establishment', and in doing so, he provided us with a model of courage. "Speak the truth," John would tell us now, "and when you do, stand up straight and tall, shout out your message no matter what the consequences." John would say, "When you speak the truth, never whisper, never let your head hang low, and never mumble."

Note that when John took upon the role of 'The Baptist', he became an agent of change - he did not wield a sword, but the word was his to communicate. We can never underestimate the power of the spoken word.

And today there are issues to be challenged. Prayer in schools has fallen by the wayside. Religious symbols in public places are disappearing. And all the while, the media is making disreputable behaviour look commonplace... such as the crowds gathering in the midst of a pandemic (before the latest lockdown).

Within the church we face situations that can limit our effectiveness as Christian witnesses. We can be complacent. We get comfortable with the way things are and do not see any reason to challenge those who say, "It can't be done." Others will say, "But we've always done it this way." Others will advise, "Don't rock the boat." But there is a need to encourage freedom of thought. We have to listen, we have to speak up, speak out and be the instruments of change. We can learn from John, and know that the scriptures invite us to speak out, indeed, command us to speak out. The scriptures invite us to choose our words carefully, for our words may comfort, heal, soothe, work for justice, bring peace. To be sure, our actions are crucial to an effective witness.

John's example points us to another powerful teacher. One whose words challenge us today. **So, a word in the right place...** inviting a friend to 'tune in' to the online service, suggest coming along to a church service - it may change a life. A word spoken in someone's defence may right an injustice. A word about Jesus may save a soul.

We recognise, through the role of John the Baptist, the part we can play in proclaiming God's message, to communicate in such a way that those who hear fully comprehend. In the face of awesome power, armed with nothing but the spoken word, **John began to preach**. He reached back into scripture and chose words from the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord." John had a very unusual message and ministry... Bible Scholars consider him to be a ROAD BUILDER - making the way for Jesus to come to us through "the wilderness". It would be Jesus Christ who would redeem the earth, to bring Salvation. "Get ready. The One who is to come is almost here."

We must be ready. We must make straight the paths of our lives. The roughest places in our lives are to be made smooth. We are to prepare for the arrival of the One who is to come by cleaning up our act. We can change! We are urged, "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD. MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!"

God's plan is that Salvation will come to this world through the Man from Galilee. Jesus, our Redeemer came to save all mankind. Jesus was affirmed at his baptism is at the very start of his earthly ministry. The Spirit descends, God's voice declares '**My Son, the Beloved**'. Jesus is made known.

Intercessions:

We pray for health workers tending the seriously ill; **for scientists working on vaccines**; for researchers analysing data & identifying trends; **for the media working to communicate reality**; for supermarket workers; **for hygiene and sanitation providers**; for good news stories of recoveries; **for effective planning**; for the recognition that isolation doesn't need to mean loneliness; **for the internet and telephones and technology that connects**; for the awakened appreciation of what is truly important. Thanks be to God.

For those who are unwell; **for those concerned for loved ones**; for those who are already very anxious; **for those immune suppressed or compromised**; for the vulnerable because of underlying conditions; **for those in the 'most at risk to the coronavirus**; for those who are bereaved and grieving; **for those watching their entire income stream dry up**; for those who have no choice but to go out to work; **for those who are afraid to be at home**; for those who are more lonely than they've ever been. God be their healer, comfort and protection, be their strength, shield and provision; be their security, safety and close companion.

Raise us up to be your Church, your hands and feet to be present to the pain, to respond with love in action - even if from a safe distance. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Meditation:

John the Baptist - a narrative



River Jordan

I knew he was my cousin. But we had lost touch. My mother Elizabeth never tired of telling me about the circumstances of my birth and Mary's visit before Jesus was born. But years had passed. My mother and father died when I was quite young, and I grew up near the desert while Jesus and his family moved back north to Nazareth. The last time I met him was at the Passover when we were in our early youth. He got separated from the family and was discovered in the Temple holding his own with the theologians. I always knew there was something special about him but despite the stories didn't really imagine that he could be the one to come.

Then I received my own summons. I felt called, like the prophets. But I was only a voice, a harbinger, a forerunner, I knew that... What I was, was far less important than the one for whom I was the herald. I was clear about my mission: to call the nation to repentance, to come out to the desert for cleansing, for a new beginning; to warn a crooked and perverse generation to flee the wrath to come. Much to my surprise people came flocking to the banks of the Jordan to hear my message - rich and poor, Pharisees and tax collectors, soldiers and civilians. I sensed we were on the brink of revival.

Then **he** came. And I heard God whisper this is the one. I was to baptise him. I was dumbfounded: he should have baptised me. I wasn't worthy to take off his shoes but he insisted on it. When he was emerging from the water I saw God's sign, the dove, and heard the voice: 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.' It was the most glorious moment of my life. I had accomplished my mission. I felt so sure then. I had baptised with water, but the Spirit of God rested on him!

His going off into the desert seemed to confirm this. I too had spent time in the wilderness to be alone with God. I too had my calling tested by the enemy. Don't imagine solitude is paradise. The desert is peopled with the enemies within: doubt, fear, pride; as well as the normal appetites of the flesh: hunger, thirst - and lust. I've fought with them too. That would be what he faced but worse. Along with that overwhelming sense of the presence of God's Spirit at his baptism I was conscious of a darker, ruthless foe. The very witness to his identity as the promised One seemed to invite all hell's legions to attack him. I shuddered as I watched him head into the desert.

I hardly saw him again, for no sooner than he returned I was arrested and shut in this dark, foul stifling cell. And the doubts returned. Had I been mistaken? He does not measure up to my expectation. True he's a wonderful preacher, he works great miracles. But where's the fire from heaven? Where's the axe that should be laid at the stump? At times he seems too gentle, too relaxed, too accepting. He enjoys the feasting and festivity. He laughs as well as weeps. Is he the Lamb of God? I wish I could talk to him, to satisfy my fears. It would be a bitter irony if I had founded my whole life on a lie. That an impostor had taken me in. So I have sent messengers to put this question to him. Is he the one, or shall we look for another?

1. From heaven you came helpless babe, entered our world, your glory veiled
Not to be served but to serve and give Your life that we might live

**This is our God, The Servant King. He calls us now to follow Him
To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to The Servant King**

2. There in the garden of tears my heavy load he chose to bear
His heart with sorrow was torn 'Yet not My will but Yours, ' He said **This is our God ...**

3. Come see His hands and His feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice
Hands that flung stars into space To cruel nails surrendered **This is our God ...**

4. So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him
Each other's needs to prefer for it is Christ we are serving **This is our God ...**

Closing Prayers:

Lord, help us to be open to your prompting as we seek to discover your will for us.

Remind us again and again that you have promised to be our guide & companion on our journey.

Help us to look forward with renewed commitment, bless our thinking and speaking and doing.

In your name we pray.

Amen

