

Matthew 1:18-3:17
Jesus' Baptism: End Religion

Sermon

Hobart, February 5th, 2012

Devonport, February 11th, 2012

Launceston, February 12th, 2012

I. OLD TESTAMENT READING:

Hosea 11:1-2

11 ¹“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and I called my son out of Egypt.

² But the more I^{*} called to him,
the farther he moved from me,
offering sacrifices to the images of Baal
and burning incense to idols.

³ I myself taught Israel^{*} how to walk,
leading him along by the hand.
But he doesn't know or even care
that it was I who took care of him.

* As in Greek version; Hebrew reads *they*.

* Hebrew *Ephraim*, referring to the northern kingdom of Israel; also in 11:8, 9, 12.

II. GOSPEL READING

Matthew 3:1-17

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

³ In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, ²“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

³ The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!

Clear the road for him!’ ”*

⁴ John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. ⁶ And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. ⁹ Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ¹⁰ Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”¹

* Isa 40:3 (Greek version).

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mt 1:18-3:17). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

INTRODUCTION:

III. MOST PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING

1. It is part of being human to deeply desire a sense of well-being, identity, happiness, comfort, security, peace, being respected, recognised, value, appreciated, listened to, loved

B. SO PEOPLE GO LOOKING TO FIND THESE THINGS IN ALL SORTS OF PLACES AND WAYS

1. They try following the latest fads and products and experiences that the world, particularly the media hang out in front of us constantly and repeatedly, with great urging, drama, colour and noise

a) Buy this, do that, go here, drink this, eat that, wear this, take this

2. When we find or buy or do what we thought we wanted, most often we discover it isn't what we expected

a) And we then go looking for something else that will bring us meaningful satisfaction, and the story repeats itself over and over

S.P.S:

C. LOOKING FOR MEANING AND FULFILMENT IN LIFE ISN'T NEW

1. It is the history of mankind, it is also very much the history of religion down through the ages, including today

2. And it is one of the central stories of the Scriptures, especially of Ancient Israel

D. TODAY WE ARE GOING TO BE LOOKING AT THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF THE MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

1. And seeing how Jesus' gives us what we all really need
 - a) Instead of having to search and find it, he brings it directly to us

E. PRAYER

BODY:

IV. RELIGION

A. RELIGION

1. What do most religions have in common, what is their goal?
2. Looking for meaning, fulfilment, ultimate truths and experiences, through the "god" they find best fits their needs and situation

B. ISRAEL;

1. Didn't trust in God alone, they always felt the need to follow after the local gods
2. So they built altars to the other gods, and engaged in their religious practices as well as those of the true God
3. They weren't willing to put all their eggs in the one basket

Hosea 11:1-2

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and I called my son out of Egypt.
² But the more I^{*} called to him,
the farther he moved from me,
offering sacrifices to the images of Baal

* As in Greek version; Hebrew reads *they*.

and burning incense to idols.

³ I myself taught Israel[†] how to walk,

leading him along by the hand.

But he doesn't know or even care

that it was I who took care of him.

4. They didn't recognise that God is the only true creator God, the God of all people and places

a) They didn't appreciate who we was or what he had done
or why

b) They didn't trust in him, they weren't loyal to him

Hosea 5:3-4

³ I know what you are like, O Ephraim.

You cannot hide yourself from me, O Israel.

You have left me as a prostitute leaves her husband;

you are utterly defiled.

⁴ Your deeds won't let you return to your God.

You are a prostitute through and through,

and you do not know the LORD.

5. Gregory Vall describes the situation;

To paraphrase, sin has become so deeply habitual for Israel that repentance is not within their power. Their fatal attraction to fertility worship has become an interior spiritual principle that holds them in bondage, with the result that they lack the theological understanding, the moral rectitude, and the whole-hearted personal devotion to Yahweh that together constitute the knowledge of God. Implicitly, only a divine act of spiritual deliverance can save Israel.²

* Hebrew *Ephraim*, referring to the northern kingdom of Israel; also in 11:8, 9, 12.

² Gregory Vall, *The Knowledge of God in Israel's Prophetic Literature*, chapter in *The Bible and Epistemology*; eds. Mary Heally & Robin Parry, Paternoster, 2007, p.34

C. ROBERT WEBBER (THE DIVINE EMBRACE)

1. Discusses how even today in Christianity, these old tendencies still tend to dominate

a) He talks about how we have “developed privatized spiritualities of legalism, intellectualism, and experientialism.”³

2. He describes how these three legalisms developed;

Doctrinal legalism emerged in the struggle with liberalism in the first part of the twentieth century. The fundamentalist movement sought to protect historic Christianity through inerrancy, propositional theology, evidential apologetics, and the concept of a pure church.

This resulted in a us/them mentality. By the time the battle with liberalism ended...the evangelical legalism created out of that situation became sacrosanct...

What had been added to the faith as a way of protecting it now became the faith. Because legalists are passionate about their do's and don'ts and to specific interpretations they add to the faith, they fight with people who don't agree with their ethos, their method, or the particular spin they give to biblical authority, theology, the church, behavior, or spirituality.

The problem with legalistic mentality is that it adds to the gospel and in some sense denigrates the Good News. It goes beyond biblical faith and practice to require adherence to systems of behaviour and belief that go beyond the story of God and the freedom to live in the new life modelled by Jesus. These added features of the faith are usually systems of control...

..In the end legalism subverts the gospel. God's grace...becomes so lost in the legalistic system that when grace is presented to those who are legalistic, grace is often rejected as untrue.⁴

For a legalist, spirituality is tantamount to saying, 'I think the right way, live the right way, associate with the right people, read my Bible, pray, go to church, and avoid worldly ways; therefore I am spiritual.'

Legalistic spirituality is not directly situated in God's story of creation, incarnation, and re-creation. Legalistic spirituality is stated in derivative

³ Robert E. Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life*, Baker Books, 2008, p.78

⁴ Webber, p.82-83

rules and doctrines... This sort of spirituality, instead of contemplating the mystery of God's vision and participating in the life purpose by God, measures a person's spiritual state by the secondary rules doctrines that ask: "Are you keeping the rules?" Are you adhering to the doctrinal particulars espoused by this particular church?" Legalism focuses on the self and how well the self adheres to the group expectations.⁵

D. WEBBER THEN TALKS ABOUT THE SIMILAR PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE FOCUSED AND EXPERIENCE FOCUSED RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUALITIES.

1. He talks about the influence of the Enlightenment and modern period in human thought and culture of the 18th and 19th centuries
2. And how Evangelical started focusing on historical, grammatical and logical intellectual methods of arriving at truth about God and life
 - a) He talks about how this approach "led to a proof-oriented Christianity."⁶

The faith was to be regarded as true because it had been tested and proven to be true through the Enlightenment method of gaining facts in history and science. Consequently, Christianity became a fact to be believed, a truth upon which one could stake his or her life.⁷

3. He then observes how this led to unspiritual results;

Often the lust to embrace higher knowledge forms within us altitudes that are the opposite of Christian spirituality. Assuming that we have the "true system of knowledge," we may become divisive, judgmental, haughty, contentious, argumentative, arrogant, defensive, and proud. ... "I know the truth, and you don't, so I cannot have fellowship with you."

In the end an intellectual spirituality is situated, not in God's story, but in *my* knowledge about God's story, which is inherently limited.

⁵ Webber, p.83

⁶ Webber, p.85

⁷ Webber, p.85

The contemplation of God, of his person, creation, incarnation, and re-creation of the world, is a different kind of knowledge... [which] moves us to ...participating in God's life for the world.⁸

4. We and many Christians have based our religious lives, and spiritual quest to find God and meaning for our lives upon these two legalistic potholes

a) of right practices

b) and discovering proving and holding to pure doctrinal knowledge.

E. A THIRD RELIGIOUS POTHOLE IS EXPERIENCE BASED:

1. It is a focus on finding and knowing God through feeling and experiencing God.

2. Webber;

To suggest "I am a spiritual person because I *felt* the forgiveness of God in a particular experience" places confidence in my experience rather than in God's embrace of me on the hard wood of the cross. This kind of spirituality tends to center of the self, dwelling on the experience itself for the certainty of salvation and spirituality. "If don't 'feel' something then we aren't being spiritual enough."⁹

3. Meryl Smoakes wrote about his early religious experience;

My evangelical, Baptist heritage pushed me to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Personal quiet times, personal Bible studies, and discipleship programs were the formula...

This approach has basically led to a 'works' mentality and an individual approach to Christianity."

4. This is the opposite as Webber says,

"to the ancient emphasis on union with God accomplished by the incarnate Word in his death and resurrection given to us as a gift."

5. Webber adds;

⁸ Webber, p.87

⁹ Webber, p.89

“What is important here is not that I in and of myself achieve or create a personal relationship with God, but that God has a personal relationship with me through Jesus Christ, which I affirm and nourish.”¹⁰

6. The problem in all of these potholed approaches is the emphasis is on us, on us finding, knowing, practicing and experiencing

a) Rather than on trusting in God, and who he is, and what he has given to us to freely receive and participate and be blessed in

F. GOD BECOMES A COMMODITY

1. People use Jesus as a boyfriend, an emotional blanket, someone to be in love with and loved by

2. And the Holy Spirit as a badge of superiority, or a personal genie in a bottle, an instant source of power and confidence

3. And the Father as their authority and justification to be self-assured and push their views on others and wield power over and control them

G. CHURCH; BECOMES A CONSUMER FOCUSED ORGANISATION, OR BUSINESS

1. A self-help clinic

2. An emotional experience, to feel good

a) Where we get caught up in emotional music, emotional words and experiences

3. A place where we hear what we want to hear

a) Where we hear our views strongly voiced

b) Where we hear those things we view as wrong and irritating strongly opposed and condemned

4. Where we hear clear black and white solutions to all our personal problems

a) Where we hear the future all mapped out for us and the world

¹⁰ Webber, p.89

5. Where we are assured we are the good guys, and we will be safe

a) Because we believe the right things, and practice the right religious principles and observances

H. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THIS APPROACH?

1. It makes what we believe and do the key to being righteous and acceptable

2. It puts the onus on us to please God and be worthy of his salvation

3. It turns faith into a works, human based, religion

a) Knowing the truth becomes our burden and responsibility

b) Being happy and acceptable depends on us correctly practicing the right formula, the proper rules and practices

c) There is a deep fear of not measuring up, because then we won't get what we want, but will be punished and rejected

I. BUT THANKFULLY, AND WONDERFULLY, THIS IS NOT THE WAY THINGS ARE

1. The message of the Gospel, of the history of Israel, and the birth of Jesus, and his life, death and resurrection

a) Is that God comes to us

b) He has come to us, in Jesus of Nazareth

J. LET'S SEE HOW MATTHEW EXPLAINS IT IN THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF HIS GOSPEL

V. MATTHEW 1-3

Mathew 1:20-23

²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus,* for he will save his people from their sins."

* *Jesus* means "The LORD saves."

²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

²³ "Look! The virgin will conceive a child!

She will give birth to a son,

and they will call him Immanuel,*

which means 'God is with us.' "

A. JESUS IS GOD COME TO BE WITH US

1. To bring us to him

a) God comes to us, we don't have to, and cannot of ourselves, through works or special knowledge, get ourselves to him

2. The wise men didn't get themselves into God's presence by keeping the law or being righteous

2 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men* from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ²"Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose,* and we have come to worship him."

a) They weren't even Israelites, they were Gentiles, pagans

b) God led them to Jesus

c) They answered the call, they responded to his leading and guidance

d) They acknowledged who he was in all humility, and recognised him, worshipped him, and gave him gifts that symbolised who he was, and what he came to do for them, and all mankind

Matthew 2:9-11

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and

* Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10 (Greek version).

* Or *royal astrologers*; Greek reads *magi*; also in 2:7, 16.

* Or *star in the east*.

worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

B. HEROD

1. Herod was so afraid of Jesus, that he sought to have him found and killed
 - a) So Joseph, under God's instructions took Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt
 - b) Later they went back and lived in Nazareth in Galilee

C. JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 3:1-4

3 In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, ²“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*”

D. IS OUR SPIRITUAL WALK AND SALVATION BASED ON RELIGION?

1. On what we do for God, what we do to get him to make our lives better, ways that make us feel comfortable and suit our desires, and hopes and ideas
 - a) Or on what we know, on the truths we have proved and hold firmly to
 - b) On what we experience and feel emotionally
2. Or is our faith and spiritual life founded upon what God has done for us, humbly and gratefully accepting his ways, whether they make us feel better or fit with our ideas or not

E. JOHN CALLED ON PEOPLE TO CHANGE THEIR THINKING, AND ATTITUDES

1. They were schooled deeply in righteousness by religious rules and practices of the law
 - a) The mentality of the time was one of legalism, viewing God as a far off figure that you had to get on the right side of

* Or *has come, or is coming soon.*

b) You had to have the right practices and right knowledge

³ The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!

Clear the road for him!’ ”*

⁴ John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

2. John prepared the way for the Lord to come among us

a) He cleared the way ahead

b) He was humble, and very different from the religious teachers and rulers

⁹ Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ¹⁰ Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

3. Clearly the message for them and for us, is we cannot depend on who we are, what we believe and do in order to be God’s people

4. The time was coming immediately in which this old religious, self-oriented, works based approach to God was going to be uprooted, brought crashing to the ground

¹¹ “I baptize with* water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* ¹² He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”

* Isa 40:3 (Greek version).

* Or *in*.

* Or *in the Holy Spirit and in fire*.

5. Jesus, was coming to save us from our religious approach to God, our misled, self-focused spiritualities
6. To destroy, clean up and replace the old ways, the old attitudes towards God
 - a) To bring the repentance, the change Hosea said Israel was incapable of

F. JESUS WAS COMING TO REPLACE THERE WRONG RELGIOUS APPROACH WITH HIS OWN WORSHIP AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. To become the one and only, true and effective way of man and God being united as one
2. Of making it possible for each and all of us to be in a righteous, loving, intimate relationship with him
 - a) A relationship, not based on what we do, but on what Jesus would do, for us, as one of us, as God with us, and for us

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?"

¹⁵ But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.*" So John agreed to baptize him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened* and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him.

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

G. THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF JESUS FULFILLING ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR YOU, FOR ME

1. As you, as me
 - a) On our behalf, in our place
 - b) Not because of what we practice, know, or experience of ourselves

* Or for we must fulfill all righteousness.

* Some manuscripts read *opened to him*.

2. But because of who God really is

3. Because God loves us,

- a) and in his grace and mercy, he has done all that is needed for us to come into his presence, fully accepted, and embraced for ever, without conditions

CONCLUSION:

VI. HOW DO WE RESPOND TO THIS UNCONDITIONAL OFFER?

A. BY ACCEPTING IT IN HUMILITY, THANKFULNESS AND LOVING DEVOTION

1. This is our ongoing, daily response

- a) Humbly surrendering to his coming into our lives through his Spirit
- b) To continually open our eyes to things we cannot know, find or figure out on our own
- c) Rather than insisting that our worship and relationship be on our terms, according to the religious ideas of our times, of our own minds

Matthew 3:16-17

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened* and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him.

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

2. This is our baptism, that Jesus underwent as you and me, as all mankind

- a) And so God's words to Jesus, are God's word to us;
- b) You are my dearly loved Son or Daughter, who brings me great joy."

3. We don't have to find God, he has found us

* Some manuscripts read *opened to him*.

a) He brings us all we need, and all we need is him, come to us as in Jesus Christ

4. We are blessed with being included in his life

a) Being enabled to know him, experience him, and participate in his life

B. PRAYER



COMMUNION

C. THE WISE MEN WERE LED TO JESUS

1. The true religion was revealed to them in a person
2. God came and revealed himself to all mankind

D. GOD IS CONTINUALLY SEEKING US OUT

1. Leading us to him through his Son, who has brought us into his life of blessing, belonging, and being made whole and complete

E. JESUS BAPTISM WAS OUR BAPTISM

1. He leads us from death to new life through all he did on God's behalf, for us, and on our behalf for God
2. He is the way, the truth, and the life
3. Sharing in his life leads us to practice, know and experience true spirituality, the life of God, the life embraced by God, the life of worshipping and glorifying God in all we are and do

F. AS WE TAKE THE BREAD AND WINE

1. We acknowledge that we have been given all we need, all we have vainly sought after in the past
2. That our life has true meaning, value, purpose in and through Jesus life, death and resurrection

G. BREAD:

1. Jesus is the true bread of life
2. He is the only way, truth and life that satisfies and fulfils

H. WINE:

1. Jesus blood is the true drink
2. His life's blood was given for us, to give us a share in his life, to assure us of the Father's love, that he will never leave us or forsake us
3. That we are truly his, safe and treasured, his beloved children