

## “Redeeming Grace”

Matthew 11:2-11 & Select Verses from Luke 1 & 3 and Matthew 3

Pastor James York

December 4, 2016

**Luke 1: Select Verses** “There was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations. One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.’”

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited Elizabeth. **Luke 1:44** “Elizabeth exclaimed, “When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb, John, jumped for joy.”

Jesus and John were playmates, attended temple together, and were best friends. **Matthew 3:1-10 Select Verses** “John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. John’s message was, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” 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!’” 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. People from all over went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. 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 the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. 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. 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.” **Luke 3:10-14 Select Verses** “The crowds asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.” **Matthew 3:11-17 Select Verses** “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. 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.” Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John tried to talk Jesus out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” John said, “so why are you coming to me?” But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize Jesus. 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. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” **Luke 3:19-20 Select Verses** “John also publicly criticized Herod, for marrying his brother’s wife, and for many other wrongs he had done. So Herod put John in prison.”

Being Jesus’ close friend, being trained in scripture together and at Jesus baptism, seeing into heaven and hearing God’s voice filled John with tremendous hope, an unwavering confidence in the promises of God, a focus on the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom. John believed God called him to prepare the way for Jesus, to call people away from the cares of the world, so each person can build their own relationship with God. John

preached moral reform and transforming hope. John proclaimed that one's love for all, and service for the least, reveals whether one is a believer in God or not.

John became discouraged, fearful, and full of doubt as he suffered in prison. John a fire and brimstone preacher, adamant in the necessity of each person's repentance, questioned the grace of Jesus freely given to all people, to the point that he questioned if Jesus was really God's Son. The reports of Jesus' graciousness were not conforming with his perceptions of God. John was struggling to live into grace, because it was so different than what he learned from his parents, who were both priests, who trained him to be a religious leader.

**Matthew 11:2-11** “John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” Jesus told them, “Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” And Jesus added, “God blesses those who are not offended by me.” As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began talking about John to the crowds. “What kind of man did you go into the wilderness to see? Was John a weak reed, swayed by every breath of wind? Or were you expecting to see a man dressed in expensive clothes? No, people with expensive clothes live in palaces. Were you looking for a prophet? Yes, and John is more than a prophet. John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way before you.’ “I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is!”

Can you relate with John? At times a passionate believer, yet other times doubting that abundant life and love are growing. Working hard, loving extravagantly, serving boldly, yet everything falls apart. Feelings of disillusionment, frustration, despair, fear and sadness. Believing that life will be glorious, but right now overwhelmed by an agonizing situation. Fretting what if my life, my love, joy, belief is all for nothing. Fearing that his ministry and Jesus ministry are both failing. Troubled that all is lost. Despite all of John's doubts Jesus declares that John is the greatest person to have ever lived. This a glorious declaration of the age to come.

What made John the greatest? His passionate love? His leaps of joy every time he perceived God? His conviction that God transforms us? His hope in the coming of God's kingdom? His courage to proclaim his understanding of God's will, even when it meant confronting the rich and powerful? His zeal for caring for creation? His insistence that the poor be more than cared for, that everyone shares with them? His humility to admit that he might be wrong about God's plan? His persistence to keep asking questions, and seeking, even when overwhelmed with crushing doubt? Or was it something else?

Synthesis newsletter says, “Here was the man of whom Jesus said that there was no one greater. Yet he needed assurance that Jesus was the One, that the broken fabric of life could be re-knit, that all would come together, and that the people might see freedom and know it as their true state of being—a quality of life that the world is powerless to offer. In the dark days of our own waiting and preparing, it is not difficult to understand John's doubts, his need for assurance. This is the Advent dilemma: How do we believe now? Today? In this moment? Strongly and boldly enough to stake our lives on it? In Advent, those things that are hidden in our souls may naturally come to light, as we allow the strong themes of waiting and preparation to move us to action, to help us count the days with strength and purpose rather than dread or fear.”

Craig Kocher said, “I went to Honduras with a group of Duke students. At the end of a week of sleeping on cement floors with no electricity, no running water and building a cinderblock house in the hot sun during the day, we gathered for worship in the little church. When the priest blessed the body and blood of Christ and asked his people to come forward, they flocked towards him, all of them at once singing and dancing, hands outstretched. They approached the communion table as if someone were going to place a million dollars in their cupped hands, as if life itself was waiting for them at the front of the church. I told the priest afterwards how moved I was by the faith of his people, with the intensity and spirit in which they received the body and blood of Christ. “How do you do it at your church?” he asked. “Well,” I said, “after we say the communion prayers, the ushers line them all up in single file rows and they shuffle down front patiently. Some of them sing,” I added. “Lines,” he said. “You make them wait in lines for the bread of life!” “I don't know that anybody makes them. It's just sort of how Protestants in America do it.” The old priest paused for a moment. “Some of these people don't know where their next meal will come from. Some of them don't know if their newborn baby will

live through the year. Some won't sleep under a roof tonight. Christ is their hope. We can live for many days without food and shelter, but we cannot live for a single moment without hope."

John was the greatest to have ever lived, yet he couldn't comprehend the enormity, the inclusiveness, of God's grace. None of us are able to fathom more than a mere snippet of the grand extent of God's redeeming grace. Frederick Buechner said, "John apparently had second thoughts about Jesus later on, and it's no great wonder, where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company. Where John baptized, Jesus healed. Finally, John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put Jesus straight. "John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should cool our heals a while longer;" Jesus said, "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who have traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging". When they asked Jesus what he thought about John, he said, "They don't come any better, but when the Big Party Up There really gets off the ground, even John will look like small potatoes by comparison".

Jesus is all powerful and pure grace. Jesus fulfills every requirement of the law and is able to be gracious to everyone. Are you offended by this? Jesus gave examples of people redeemed by God's grace, people who the law condemned, people who the religious leaders judge as going to hell, people who John believed were doomed, Jesus graciously healed them, then Jesus said. **Matthew 11:6 "Blessed is anyone who takes not offense at me."** Frederick Buechner said, "And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging." If we are honest with our self each of us has someone that when we envision God's grace redeeming them we are inclined to gag. Maybe someone who hurt you? A person who is hateful? A criminal? A dictator? A terrorist? After their extreme makeover of God grace they will be greater than John the Baptist was on earth. The purpose of the law is to make us aware, that everyone, including ourselves, are saved by God's grace alone. Grace is a capacity to suspend judgement, to live with unresolved problems and relationships. Grace goes beyond quick conclusions to messy situations, to eternal restoration. Grace sees beauty in every person and embraces them. At first you might be like John, unsettled by God's grace, skeptic that God's grace can save everyone, but someday we will fully take in the radiance of redeeming grace.

Advent is a time to receive and give love, service, hope, peace, joy, transformation and restoration. Every advent is another opportunity to enjoy the dawn of redeeming grace, to let the rays penetrate our legalism, to warm our cold judgements and expand our graciousness. Heaven is radically more inclusive than our grandest imagination. You, me, each of us, will all be greater in heaven than the greatest person to ever live on earth. Advent urges us to ever expand our understanding of grace and be gracious to everyone. Amen