

Bible Stories

JOHN the CACTUS

Isaiah 40:3-5

August 12, 2023

One Sabbath, after church, a mom asked her little girl what the picture she had drawn was supposed to be. It looked like a bunch of brown scribbles surrounding some kind of big green thing. The little girl said, *"Well, this is the wilderness, and that's John the Cactus."*

Today, we are going to talk about John the Cactus.

7-6 BC – Announcement of John's Birth

400 years – known as the silent or quiet years – had elapsed since God had spoken to His people. But now, the fulness of time had come.... The *"Hope of Nations"* the *"Messiah"* was on His way.

The announcement of that longed for event came in quite an unexpected way – an angel – well, not just any run-of-the-mill angel, *"THE angel - Gabriel"* – the angel who had replaced Lucifer – appeared to an old childless priest:

In the time of Herod the Great - king of Judea - there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. Both he and his wife, Elizabeth, were descendants of Aaron. They were both upright in the sight of God, but they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. (Luke 1:5-7)

The 24 divisions of the priesthood were first listed in 1 Chronicles 24 (4-19), the 8th division being Abijah (v. 10). However, after the Babylonian Captivity, only four of the divisions were represented when the exiles returned to Judea (Ezra 2:36-38). Abijah was not 1 of the 4. The priests who did return were eventually divided into the 24 original divisions.

Fast-forward 500 years ---- The priests, from the division of Abijah, were on duty at the Temple. Zechariah was chosen to go into the Holy Place and burn incense before the Lord. As he stood before the altar of incense (located directly in front of the curtain separating the Holy from the Most Holy Place), the angel Gabriel appeared.

Gabriel: *Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son. You are to name him, John. He will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. He will bring many in Israel back to the Lord their God. He will go before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous -- to make ready a people for the Lord.*

As wonderful as it all sounded, Zechariah did not believe him, so Gabriel told him that because of unbelief, he would be unable to speak until the baby was born.... 9 months later Elizabeth gave birth to a son. True to Gabriel's word, on the 8th day, Zechariah confirmed that the baby would be named John and his voice was restored.

Malachi had prophesied regarding the coming of the Messiah, *"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me"* (3:1), and now the Holy Spirit rested upon Zechariah, and he prophesied regarding the mission of his son:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us -- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."
(Luke 1:68-79)

John grew and the Holy Spirit rested on him. He lived in the desert until he began his ministry in Israel.

29 AD – “In the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar” – John began his ministry

- **Ellen White {DA 104.2}** - When the ministry of John began, the nation was in a state of excitement and discontent verging on revolution. At the removal of Archelaus (after a 9-year rule 4BC-6AD), Judea had been brought directly under the control of Rome. The tyranny and extortion of the Roman governors, and their determined efforts to introduce the heathen symbols and customs, kindled revolt, which had been quenched in the blood of thousands of the bravest of Israel. All this intensified the national hatred against Rome, and increased the longing to be freed from her power.

John was preaching at *“Bethany – beyond the Jordan.”* Here is an excerpt from one of his sermons:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Do not 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. Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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.” (Matthew 3:7-12 and Luke 3:7-9)

John’s evangelism strategy was unusual because the descendants of Abraham did not *“need”* to repent and only Gentile converts to Judaism were ever baptized – but the people were drawn to him and many were repenting and being baptized. So weird and unsettling was this situation that the religious leaders sent their minions to investigate (John 1:19-28):

John: *Before you ask, I am not the Anointed One (Christ or Messiah)*

Minions: *Then who are you - Elijah?*

John: *No, I am not Elijah*

Minions: *Are you THE Prophet?* (They are referring to the prophet that would come in the power of Moses – see Deuteronomy 18:15, 18)

John: *Nope.*

Minions: *Then WHO ARE YOU? We’ve got a report make, man!!*

John replied by quoting Isaiah, *“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord.”*

Minions: *Okay, fine, but if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, then who gave you authority to baptize people?*

John: *I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He who comes after me - I am not worthy to untie his sandals.*

- **Ellen White {DA 109.2 and 3}** - Tidings of the wilderness prophet and his wonderful announcement, spread throughout Galilee. The message reached the peasants in the remotest hill towns, and the fisher folk by the sea, and in these simple, earnest hearts found its truest response. In Nazareth it was told in the carpenter shop that had been Joseph’s, and One recognized the call. His time had come. Turning from His daily toil, He bade farewell to His mother, and followed in the steps of His countrymen who were flocking to the Jordan.... It had been revealed to John that the Messiah would seek baptism at his hands, and that a sign of His divine character should then be given....

Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized, but John resisted, saying, “I need to be baptized by you – not the other way around.” Jesus replied, “It is right that you should baptize me in order to fulfill all righteousness.” - John agreed. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water the heavens opened. The Spirit of God descended like a dove and lighted on him. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:1-17)

John was a popular teacher – with the people. He was not popular, however, with the religious establishment and now he got crossways with Herod Antipas by telling him that it was not lawful for him to be married to Herodias, his ½ brother, Philip’s, ex-wife.

Herod arrested John and put him in prison. He wanted to kill John, but was afraid of the people, because they considered John to be a prophet - Herodias had no such concerns.

John’s life of active labor was now over. His disciples regularly came to see him and they told him that Jesus was doing great and mighty things and that huge crowds followed him, but they also wondered, out loud, why Jesus was doing nothing to save him.

No doubt, their words, even well-meaning words, had a negative effect on John.

John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” When they found him, he was curing many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to the blind. Jesus replied, “Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (Luke 7:17-23)

- **Ellen White {DA 217.2}** - The disciples took the message to John and it was enough. John recalled the prophecy concerning the Messiah, "The Lord hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Isaiah 61:1, 2. The works of Christ not only declared Him to be the Messiah, but showed in what manner His kingdom was to be established. To John was opened the same truth that had come to Elijah in the desert, (that Yahweh was not in the wind or the earthquake, but in the still small voice – 1 kings 19:11-12) So Jesus was to do His work, not with the clash of arms and the overturning of thrones and kingdoms, but through speaking to the hearts of men by a life of mercy and self-sacrifice.

John also recognized that Jesus' words, "*Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me,*" were a gentle reproof. He now understood more clearly the true nature of Jesus' mission, so then and there he willingly yielded himself to the will of God and the cause he loved - for life or for death.

On Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter, Salome, danced before Him. He was so pleased that he promised to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod was distressed, but because he had sworn an oath in front of his dinner guests, he granted her request and had John beheaded. John's head was placed on a platter and given to the girl, who gave it to her mother. John's disciples buried his body and then went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard the news, he went away by himself to a solitary place. (Matthew 14:6-13)

What do we do with this story?

I must tell you that I have struggled with this question.

This sermon has been completely written for about 3 ½ months, but I have struggled to write a satisfactory conclusion because even though I am content with the outcome of this story, many Christians are not.

Many ask the same question John's disciples asked, "*Why didn't Jesus do anything to save you?*"

- **Ellen White {DA 223.4}** - To many minds a deep mystery surrounds the fate of John the Baptist. They question why he should have been left to languish and die in prison. The mystery of this dark providence our human vision cannot penetrate; but it can never shake our confidence in God when we remember that John was but a sharer in the sufferings of Christ. All who follow Christ will wear the crown of sacrifice. They will surely be misunderstood by selfish men, and will be made a mark for the fierce assaults of Satan. It is this principle of self-sacrifice that his (Satan's) kingdom is established to destroy, and he will war against it wherever manifested.

This is the battle for the Kingdom of God. This is a war over good and evil ---- there will be casualties:

- John fell – yet the work of God continued.
- Stephen fell – yet the work of God continued.
- James fell, Peter fell, Paul fell, Huss fell (1415), Jerome fell (1416), Tyndale fell (1535), Thomas Baker fell (1867), Dietrich Bonhoeffer fell (1945), Jim Elliot fell (1956) – and the work of God continues – because the war is not yet over.

There isn't anything good about what happened to these men **AND YET** we should rejoice that their deaths are not the end of their stories. One day this war will be over **AND** our victorious Jesus will come **AND** they, along with the millions of nameless martyrs, will be resurrected **AND** they will stand forever in the presence of God **AND** they will hear the words, "*well done!*"

Hebrews 11:32-12:3 - What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated -- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.