

**“Becoming People Who Level Mountains and Raise Valleys”**

**John 1:19-28**

**March 17, 2019**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pr. Nicoletti*

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter one, verses nineteen through twenty-eight. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

<sup>19</sup> And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” <sup>20</sup> He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” <sup>21</sup> And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup> So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” <sup>23</sup> He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

<sup>24</sup> (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) <sup>25</sup> They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” <sup>26</sup> John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, <sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” <sup>28</sup> These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

This is God’s word. Surely all people are like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. [Isa 40:7b-8]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as we come to your Word, along with the psalmist we ask you to be gracious to us, your servants,

that we may live and keep your word.

Open our eyes, that we may behold  
wondrous things out of your word.

Let your testimonies be our delight,  
and our chief counselors.

In Jesus name, Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

Our text this morning covers the initial interrogation of John the Baptist. Within the first chapter of this Gospel we have three days described to us with John the Baptist, and on each one John gives a different kind of testimony about Jesus. On the first day, in our text this morning, John the Baptist testifies to who the Christ, the Messiah, is, and he does it primarily by describing his own role and how it relates to the coming Christ. On the second day, in verses twenty-nine through thirty-four, he testifies positively to who Jesus is, and then on the third day, in verses thirty-five and thirty-six, he sends his own disciples to follow Jesus. [Brown, 45]

This morning we look at that first recorded day of John’s testimony – as he testifies about who the Christ is by describing his own role and how it relates to the coming Messiah.

And in just our text this morning, there is a lot going on, and many interesting references and typological pictures that are being evoked ... it is tempting for me to try to cover all of those ... but instead, in order to focus us this morning, I want to direct our attention on this passage with two questions. I want to ask: What is John called to *do*? And who is John called to *be*? And then within each of those two questions I want us to ask how that relates to us – to you and me.

So that is our focus: What is John called to do? And who is John called to be?

Let's dive in.

So, first: What is John called to do?

And it's helpful for us to appreciate that in some ways that is the question underlying the priests', Levites', and Pharisees' interrogation of John in this passage.

In verse nineteen they ask, "Who are you?" but their real question, we realize in verse twenty-five, is about what John is doing, and on what *basis* he is called to do it or has the authority to do it.

John the Baptist is baptizing in the Jordan River. And there are a few things going on with that.

First, he is introducing an innovative ritual. Whatever baptisms or washings we know of that already existed in Judaism in the first century, they were largely self-administered. For John the Baptist to introduce this innovation (since *he* was baptizing them) implies that he is doing something different, and that he has been given some calling or authority to introduce this innovation. [Carson, 145]

But in addition to that ritual point, John was also doing a number of other things that made strong statements to those around him and that implied some sort of calling, authority, or authorization. One biblical scholar puts it like this – he says "Anyone collecting people in the Jordan wilderness was symbolically saying: this is the new exodus. Anybody offering water-baptism for the forgiveness of sins was saying: you can have, here and now, what you would normally get through the Temple cult. Anybody inviting those who wished to do so to pass through an initiatory rite of this kind was symbolically saying: here is the true Israel that is to be vindicated by YHWH." [Wright, 160]

So, John the Baptist is doing a lot of things that imply some sort of calling – some sort of authorization – to do them. And the reason why the priests, Levites, and Pharisees are asking who he is – the reason they are wondering if he is the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet promised by Moses – is that *these* figures might have the authority to enact this kind of new ritual. When they learn he does not claim to be any of those things, they (or at least some of the Pharisees among them) ask why he is baptizing – why he is doing what he is doing. They are essentially asking what then gives him the authority to do these things. [Carson, 145]

In the first part of their back-and-forth John the Baptist says he is not the Christ (not the Messiah), he says he is not Elijah, he says he is not the Prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18 [Carson, 143]. Who then is he, they ask in verse 22. You can hear the

frustration in their response: They have to tell their superiors who sent them *something* – What is John the Baptist’s calling? What is his role and the basis of his ministry?

He answers them then by quoting from Isaiah 40:3.

Often when a New Testament author cites just a verse from the Old Testament, he’s not really just citing that verse. He expects us to turn to that passage in the Hebrew Scriptures and look back at the larger passage he is referring to there. And this citation of Isaiah 40:3 is no exception. If the voice described in Isaiah 40 is John the Baptist, then to understand what John the Baptist is called to do, we need to look at the full description in Isaiah 40 that he’s pointing us to. And looking back there, in Isaiah 40:3-5 we find this – it says:

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

What does Isaiah have in mind here? Well, commentators point out several things, but let me highlight one strain of thought.

First is that God’s people are being called to make a highway in the desert for their God, in a way that would be “keeping with normal procedure for preparing for a visiting dignitary.” And so just as Ezekiel described Yahweh as leaving Jerusalem, now he is returning to the city, which calls for significant preparation – including the building of a highway for his arrival. [Köstenberger, 426]

The individual who is called to cry out is like a servant of a king who would be sent out beforehand to make sure that the route the king will take is put in good condition. Israel is being called on to prepare the way so that “nothing should impede” the Lord’s coming [Delitzsch, 2:141-142].

And how are the people to prepare the way? Isaiah 40:4 says that it is by lifting valleys and leveling mountains – *that* is how you make a highway for God. And what does that mean?

Old Testament commentator Franz Delitzsch puts it like this – he says: “The command, according to its spiritual interpretation, points to the encouragement of those that are cast down, [and] the humiliation of the self-righteous and self-secure.” [2: 142] – The leveling of prideful mountains and the raising of valleys of despair.

Raymond Brown brings all of this together well – he writes: “The Isaiah passage originally referred to the role of the angels in preparing a way through the desert by which Israel might return from the Babylonian captivity to the land of Palestine. Like a modern bulldozer the angels

were to level hills and fill in the valleys, and thus prepare a superhighway. But John the Baptist is to prepare a road, not for God's people to return to the promised land, but for God to come to His people. His baptizing and preaching in the desert was opening up the hearts of men, leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for God's intervention." [50]

Isaiah 40:3-4 tells us through symbolism and imagery that the way to prepare a people for the coming of their God is to level the mountains of pride among them and raise up the valleys of despair.

John the Baptist's calling, then, was to preach and to baptize in a way that opened up people's hearts, by "leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for God's intervention."

And while the Apostle John does not give us much of a description of what John the Baptist's ministry looked like, he also seems to assume that his readers would be familiar with the accounts in the other Gospels [Brown, 45], and there we get a picture of this work of leveling prideful mountains while filling valleys of despair.

In Matthew 3:7-10 we read that when John the Baptist "saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

If you're familiar with the Gospels you probably automatically think of the Pharisees and Sadducees as the bad guys, but you need to appreciate that in their time and place the Pharisees were the religiously rigorous and serious sect, while the Sadducees were those who had authority in the Temple. These were two different parts of the respectable religious establishment in John's day, and John calls them out as vipers – as hypocrites. What is he doing? He's leveling mountains. He's aiming to bring down "the self-righteous and self-secure". He offered them the same baptism for the forgiveness of sins, but to receive forgiveness they had to admit their sin for what it was and repent in a meaningful way. That is what it looks like to level mountains.

But others came out to John too. In Luke 3:12-13 we read that tax collectors also came out to John. Tax collectors in John's day would have been despised – not just because they collected taxes, but because they were wealthy men who collaborated with the occupying Romans in order to profit off of their fellow countrymen – usually by collecting more than they were supposed to and keeping the difference for themselves. They were despised as traitors by many Jews. And what does John do when they ask him what they should do? He calls them to repent – to not collect any more tax than they are authorized to – and he offers them the same baptism for the forgiveness of sins as everyone else. What is John doing here? Why does he hold out grace and forgiveness to those whom few Jews would want forgiven? Well ... he is lifting up valleys – he is offering grace and hope to those in valleys of despair.

What is the nature of John's baptism and preaching – what is John called to do? He is called to prepare the way of the Lord by leveling mountains of pride and raising up valleys of despair.

That is what John the Baptist is called to – and we, as God’s people, are often called to the same thing.

John was preparing the way for the Lord to come in the flesh to his people – but in a similar way we are called to prepare the way for the Lord to come by his Spirit in the lives of others.

When we minister to another person – whether a Christian or a non-Christian, whether a friend, a spouse, a child, or someone else – we *know* that we cannot on our own bring the change they need to their lives, but the Lord can. Our calling is to prepare the way for the Lord. And what does that often look like? It looks like leveling mountains and raising up valleys. Sometimes it looks like taking loving aim at someone we care about who is self-righteous or self-secure so that they will be prepared to receive the Lord in humility and dependence. Sometimes it looks like lovingly raising someone up out of despair with the assurance that their sin does not put them beyond God’s love and grace in Christ. And sometimes it looks like lovingly raising someone up whose despair is not the result of their own sin but the sin of others against them and assuring them that our God is a God who heals the broken, and who will mend their wounds if they will present them to him.

Much of Christian love, and ministry, and discipleship, is the task of preparing people to come to the Lord by urging them to demolish their mountains of pride that tell them they do not need the Lord or urging them to forsake their valleys of despair that tell them that the Lord will not help people like them.

And so, like John the Baptist we are called to prepare the way of the Lord in the lives of other people. John is a model for us in that way. We need to be like John.

*The problem is that we tend to be terrible at that.*

Far too often we offer cheap grace instead of leveling mountains. And far too often, rather than lifting up valleys we shove them down further.

What do I mean by that?

In his excellent online article titled “I Can Tolerate Anything Except the Outgroup” (an article I highly recommend), Scott Alexander, though not a Christian himself, points readers to the Father Brown story titled “The Chief Mourner of Marne” in *The Secret of Father Brown* by G. K. Chesterton.

The story follows a group of people who would like to embrace the Marquis of Marne and absolve him of a crime he committed years ago, and the interactions that the local priest, Father Brown, has with that group of people on this subject.

The people explain to Father Brown the story of how two cousins, James and Maurice, were very close years ago. James was the cousin seen as more good and noble by the people, while Maurice was more selfish and less liked. And years ago, in a duel, James, the more beloved cousin, killed Maurice. And as the people explain what happened to Father Brown, they press on him the need for everyone to just forgive James for what he did. And as they talk about the events they again and again minimize the sin he has committed.

Father Brown does not want to deny the man forgiveness, but he also believes that as part of true repentance he must embrace consequences for the sin he has committed.

And everyone is appalled by Father Brown's position.

“‘Is that what you call Christian charity?’ [one woman asked]

“‘Yes,’ answered the priest stolidly; ‘that is what I call Christian charity.’

“‘It’s all the Christian charity you’ll get out of these priests,’ cried Cockspur bitterly. ‘That’s their only idea of pardoning a poor fellow for a piece of folly; [...]’

“‘Really, Father Brown,’ said General Outram, ‘do you honestly think he deserves this? Is that your Christianity?’

“‘Surely the true Christianity,’ pleaded [the general’s] wife more gently, ‘is that which knows all and pardons all; the love that can remember – and forget.’

“‘Father Brown,’ said young Mallow, very earnestly, ‘I generally agree with what you say; but I’m hanged if I can follow you here. A shot in a duel, followed instantly by remorse, is not such an awful offence.’

“‘I admit.’ Said Father Brown dully, ‘that I take a more serious view of his offence.’

“‘God soften your hard heart,’ said [another woman,] speaking for the first time.” [361-362]

Distressed by his position, the people push past him and seek out James.

But when he is found, and they seek to embrace him, it is then that they discover that the man they came to forgive is not James, the beloved cousin, but Maurice, the much less esteemed cousin. And all of a sudden, the full story comes out: James did not kill Maurice, but Maurice killed James and then stole his identity!

The group is in shock and then Father Brown turns to them all and says this – he says: “And now I leave Maurice [...] to your Christian charity. You have told me something to-day about Christian charity. You seem to me to give it almost too large a place; but how fortunate for poor sinners like this man that you err so much on the side of mercy and are ready to be reconciled to all mankind.”

But the group will have nothing of it.

“‘Hang it all,’ exploded the general; ‘if you think I’m going to be reconciled to a filthy viper like that, I tell you I wouldn’t say a word to save him from hell. [...]’

“‘He ought to be lynched,’ cried Cockspur excitedly. “‘He ought to burn alive [...]. And if there is such a thing as burning forever, he jolly well-’

“‘I wouldn’t touch him with a barge-pole myself,’ said Mallow.

“‘There *is* a limit to human charity,’ said Lady Outram, trembling all over.

“‘There is,’ said Father Brown dryly; ‘and that is the real difference between human charity and Christian charity. You must forgive me if I was not altogether crushed by your contempt for my uncharitableness to-day; or by the lectures you read me about pardon for every sinner. For it seems to me that you only pardon the sins that you don’t really think sinful. You only forgive criminals when they commit what you don’t regard as crimes, but rather conventions. So you tolerate a conventional duel, just as you tolerate a conventional divorce. You forgive because there isn’t anything to be forgiven.’

“‘But, hang it all,’ cried Mallow, ‘you don’t expect us to be able to pardon a vile thing like this?’

“‘No,’ said the priest; ‘but *we* have to be able to pardon it.’

“He stood up abruptly and looked round at them.

“‘*We* have to touch such men, not with a bargepole, but with a benediction,’ he said. ‘*We* have to say the word that will save them from hell. We alone are left to deliver them from despair when your human charity deserts them. Go on your primrose path pardoning all your favourite vices and being generous to your fashionable crimes; and leave us in the darkness [...] to console those who really need consolation; who do things really indefensible, things that neither the world nor they themselves can defend; and none but a priest will pardon. Leave us with the men who commit the mean and revolting and real crimes; mean as St. Peter when the cock crew, and yet the dawn came.’” [365-366]

What is Chesterton getting at here?

Rather than calling people to real repentance and offering them real forgiveness, we far too often offer cheap grace to those we like (or who commit sins we don’t mind much), while we condemn those we don’t like (or those who commit sins we especially dislike).

And Scott Alexander in his article points to this story because he says this tendency is rampant in our culture.

We see it, for example, in our politics: Each political tribe condemns their opponents for their deceptions and corruptions, while easily excusing the deceptions and corruptions of those in their own tribe.

But it comes out in even more disturbing ways.

When the stories of sexual abuse and assault in Hollywood, by Harvey Weinstein and other men, began to break, one of the more disturbing elements that came out was how many powerful people knew that these things were going on but did nothing to stop it. What was supposed to be one of the chief liberal bastions of society, which claimed to be so much more enlightened than so many others in our culture, had failed to act against known systematic sexual abuse and exploitation in their industry. Instead of confronting abusers, instead of aiming to level those mountains, many others in power had just excused these behaviors in those around them. Instead of coming alongside the abused and exploited, instead of lifting up valleys – valleys that in many cases were the result of being sinned against and *not* a result of the sin of the victim – instead of lifting up those valleys, others shoved them down and discarded them. They did the opposite of what John the Baptist calls us to in our text.

Many on the conservative side of our culture chalked this up to the moral compass of Hollywood. And then last month the Houston Chronicle published its investigative report on victims of sexual abuse at the hands of pastors and leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention, and the repeated stories in so many cases where abusive leaders were given cheap grace without facing the consequences of their sin, while their victims were shamed or ignored.

And now, in these churches, which were supposed to be bastions of moral integrity and protection of the vulnerable, in groups which claimed so much more moral fortitude than the

culture around them, we see repeated failures to act against known sexual abuse and exploitation. In too many cases, instead of confronting abusers, instead of aiming to level those mountains, many others in power offered offenders cheap grace and moved on. And instead of coming alongside the abused and exploited, instead of lifting up valleys – valleys that again were the result of being sinned against and not a result of the sin of the victim – instead of lifting them up, they shoved them down and discarded them. They too did the opposite of what John the Baptist calls us to in our text.

We see it in Father Brown's interaction with his detractors. We see it at both the liberal and conservative poles of our culture.

Where do you see it in your life? What kind of sins are you tempted to let slide? Who in your life are you tempted to excuse for their sins – to offer them cheap grace without real and meaningful repentance?

And on the other side: What are the kinds of sins you find yourself extending no grace to at all – that you respond to with only condemnation? What kind of sinners do you respond to with nothing but contempt?

Or, to take the other kind of valley: What kind of victims in despair, what kind of people who lack power, or are often taken advantage of, do you find yourself indifferent to – uninterested in lifting up?

As ugly as it is, every one of us have people whose pride we are willing to ignore, or whose despair we are willing to overlook. Who is it for you?

As we recognize those tendencies we need to hear again the voice crying out: “prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

And what is the process for making that highway? What was John the Baptist seeking to do? ... He was working so that “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;”

That's the answer to our first question.

What was John the Baptist called to do? He was called to level mountains of pride and raise valleys of despair, in order to prepare the way for the Lord to work.

That's what he did.

And that's what we want to do too, right?

We *want* to be people who will take on mountains of pride – not to destroy the prideful person, but to destroy the pride so that God might make the person whole. We *want* to be people who lift up valleys – valleys of those who despair of their sin, and valleys of those who despair of their brokenness – so that they too might come to the Lord and be made whole.

We want to be those kinds of people. We struggle with it – we are not as good as we’d like to be – we so often do the opposite. So how do we become people who can do that well?

That brings us to our second question. We have seen what John was called to *do*. Now we need to ask who John was called to *be*.

Who was John called to *be* so that he might *do* what he was called to do?

What we see as we look at our text is that before John *did* any of this work – before he went out to level mountains and raise valleys – he had taken that process into his own heart first.

John the Baptist was a man who had first sought to level the mountains of pride and raise up the valleys of despair in his own heart.

Can we appreciate, for a minute, just how tempting it must have been for John the Baptist to give in to pride?

Saint Augustine points out that John the Baptist had to seriously let people know that he was not the Messiah. Without any irony, he had to inform them that he was not the Savior. The fact that he even had to say that tells, Augustine says, that “John, in fact, was such an outstanding figure, that people could believe that he was the Christ.” [*Homily 4.3*]. I don’t know about you, but no one has ever made that mistake about me.

But rather than give in to that opportunity for pride, how does John describe himself? Rather than comparing himself favorably with the Christ, he says of the Messiah who is coming “the strap of [his] sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

We easily miss the weight of what John is saying here. It’s not just some sort of picturesque hyperbole he’s going for.

In a first century Jewish setting a student could be required to do for his teacher any task that a slave might do, *except* to take off his sandals. That was too humiliating a task in their culture for a student to perform. *That* was the work of a slave. [Carson, 146; Brown, 44]

If John had said that he *would* untie the strap of the Messiah’s sandal because that wasn’t beneath him, that would have been a statement of humility – that would have been a way of placing himself *below* being even a student of the Christ.

But by saying that even untying the strap of his sandal was too elevated a task for him, John was saying that he wasn’t even worthy to be the Messiah’s *slave*.

While others might have wondered if he *was* the Messiah, John knew that he wasn’t even worthy to be the true Messiah’s slave.

Before John took aim at the mountains of pride in anyone else, he had already worked to demolish those same mountains in his own heart.

But at the same time, even as he saw his unworthiness before God, it did not drive him to despair.

John still took up the lofty task he was called to – not because he was worthy of it (he'd already declared that he wasn't), but he took up the task in a way that was accepting the gracious call of the Lord. That means that he did not assume that his unworthiness cut him off from the Lord – he did not wallow in a valley of despair in his heart – but he lifted that valley to the Lord, received his merciful pardon, and then received the gracious call the Lord placed on him to be the voice calling out to prepare a way for the coming of the Christ.

Before John reached out to lift others out of their valleys, he lifted up the valleys in his own heart to the grace of the gospel.

Who was John called to be so that he might do the task he was called to do?

*Before he could truly take aim at the mountains and valleys in other people, he was called to be a man who leveled the mountains of pride and raised up the valleys of despair in his own heart, that the Lord might fully come to him.*

What about us, then?

We each have this topography in our hearts: we each have mountains of pride and valleys of despair. Sometimes at distances from each other, sometimes quite close together. What are some of them for you?

What are your mountains of prideful *self-security*? What are the areas of your heart and life that you *need* to be in control of, that you pridefully cling to, and believe that you can handle it better than anyone else – including God – so long as you can keep a grip of control over it. What are the areas where you need to let go, step back, and declare with John “I am not the Christ.”?

What are the mountains of prideful *self-righteousness*? Where you are confident you are superior to those around you – where you tell yourself and others that you can secure your own righteousness and moral standing, “thank you very much”? Where do you need to recognize that in your very best efforts ... you are not good enough to be even a slave to Christ your king?

What mountains in your heart need to be leveled and then offered as a highway for God to travel further into your life?

And what about the valleys?

What valleys of despair over sin do you need to lift up to the Lord to receive his grace? What is that sin or that area that you don't really believe God will ever forgive you for? And maybe you ignore it, or maybe you try frantically to make up for it in some other area of life, or maybe you try to punish yourself for it, or maybe you resign yourself to God's displeasure. Where do you need instead to raise up that valley, to lift up your sin to the Lord, to receive his grace in the gospel?

And what valleys of brokenness and pain are there? What wounds have you hidden in the deep valleys of your heart? What pockets of shame or fear from what has been done to you have you hidden in those dark valleys of despair in your soul? What wounds do you need to lift up to the Lord so that he might heal them and draw ever closer to you even in the midst of that brokenness?

Christ came to earth to draw close to his people, and he did not stop in the first century. He wants to draw close to you now by his Spirit. He wants intimacy with you in your heart and in your life. He wants to bring healing and restoration to you. *He loves you.*

But when he comes to draw close to us we throw up mountains of pride and trenches of despair in a sad attempt to block his way.

And here we hear the voice that cries out “Make straight the way of the Lord.” Jesus Christ our Lord comes to us. He wants to draw close to us. And so, he calls us to level the mountains of pride and raise up to him the valleys of despair, so that he might walk through the wilderness of our hearts and be with us there.

And if that were not enough of a blessing, as he does that work, he also makes us into the kind of people who can help others do the same thing – who can help them confront their own mountains and valleys, not for the sake of the confrontation, and not so they can do some sort of simple self-improvement, but so that they too can come to know the Lord in deeper and deeper ways, as he walks deeper into their lives.

The Lord, by his Spirit is on the move. In the midst of that, what will we do? Who will we be? Let us be voices, crying out to those around us and to our own hearts: “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Alexander, Scott. “I Can Tolerate Anything Except the Outgroup.” September, 30, 2014.  
(<https://slatestarcodex.com/2014/09/30/i-can-tolerate-anything-except-the-outgroup/>)
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