

## **A Time to Be Holy**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 3: 1-12

Delivered on December 8, 2019

I have been an ordained minister now for 19 years. For 11 of those nineteen years, I have worked as a full-time pastor. I have also worked in part-time ministry in two churches. I have also interviewed with dozens of churches, I have read hundreds of pastoral job descriptions, and I have advised and consulted with lots of churches on some matter or another. Now, I don't claim to be an expert on congregations. I have mostly only worked with Presbyterian congregations, so I don't claim any expertise about any church that isn't Presbyterian. Nor do I claim to have anything close to the kind of knowledge that people have who have been working in ministry for twenty-five, thirty, sometimes even forty years. I am sure that if you've been in ministry for forty years you would tell me I still have a lot to learn.

But here's something that I can tell you. In my experience, for whatever that's worth, I have never seen a church which says it does not want to grow. Some such churches may be out there, but from what I have seen whether they have 10 people on the roll or 10 thousand people, every church at least *says* they want to grow.

And here's the second thing I want to tell you. Not only does every church I know of want to grow, but they all seem to have some idea in mind of how they think they should grow. Even if they don't seem to have much of an idea of what they should do, they seem to know something about what not to do. And here is what they would say. First, in order to grow, they know they should have a pastor, or some kind of pastor-like figure. That is they should have someone at the helm. And in their minds at least the pastor-figure should be someone who is capable of presenting himself or herself as halfway professional. And so if they should have a

process where they interview this person, they think the potential pastor should come to the interview professionally dressed. In whatever they wear, whether it is a suit or something more casual, it should at least be something that is clean and half way pressed. And it might also help if they don't look like they aren't completely insane. To that end, they should have their hair brushed or combed in some way and not exploding out of their head in a hundred different directions, and if they are a man, their hair should not be exploding out of their face in a hundred different directions. It might also be advisable for them to wash their face and hands before coming to an interview so they aren't covered in dirt and mud. And not only do they not want their pastor to look completely insane, but they also seem to want him or her to be someone that people can relate to in some way. It might therefore be nice if the pastor had some kind of hobby, or at the very least it might be helpful if he or she occasionally went to a movie or watched t.v. or did something that could allow him or her to carry on a conversation with people in the church about something other than the bible or theology. And finally, tact. Let me tell you what tact is to me. Chuck Campbell, the professor who taught me how to preach, one time told me that I preached the worst sermon he ever heard, but he did it in such a nice way that it actually took me three weeks to figure out that he had told me it was the worst sermon he had ever heard. Now that's tact.

What all of this means, it seems is that no church wants to hire John the Baptist. John the Baptist who lives out in the woods, John the Baptist who speaks with locusts and wild honey dripping from his lips. John the Baptist who wears strange clothes and probably does have his hair and beard growing as wildly and as untamed as the beasts who are his only companions in the wilderness. John the Baptist who calls some of the very people who are coming out to see

him a brood of vipers, snakes. Now, I am going to tell you something that I can't prove by citing verses of scripture, it is more my impression than anything else. But if you want to know what I think, I think that John the Baptist is so weird, so abrasive and so far from what a congregation is looking for in a pastor, that if John showed up to interview with a church he wouldn't get hired if he were the only candidate applying for the call. But here's the odd thing about John the Baptist. We are told that people came out to see him, lots of people. And just how did they come out to see him. Did they load up the kids in the SUV and take a road trip with the heater blowing out nice warm air, gentle music played over the speakers, everyone sitting on cushioned seats. No way. They took their ox carts, their horses, their donkeys, their bare feet, and they went miles out into the middle of nowhere, out into the middle of nowhere to see this man that you wouldn't think any of us would drive down to the corner to see. And not only would we not drive down to the corner to see him, but I think we would drive as far away from him as we possibly could.

Now you might say, "Pastor, people were different back then. Two thousand years ago in Palestine, that was a far different time and a far different place." Fair enough. But how different were they, really? They breathed the same air that we breathe. They laughed and cried, they worked and rested. They cared about the health and safety of their children as well as their own health and safety. No, I have an idea as to what they saw in John. It was that within this man, they saw something holy. They saw something holy. Have you ever known somebody in whom you saw something holy? I don't mean that they could turn water into wine or that they had a halo around their head. But what I mean is you saw something divine in that person that you had been looking for all your life, and you didn't have any idea of what it would look like

when you found it but you also knew that you would know when you found it. If that describes anything like a search that you have been on, I think that's what people saw in John the Baptist. They saw something holy in him as he stood knee deep in the Jordan River inviting them to come forward and wash their sins away in this thing called baptism. They saw something holy in him as they heard him preach about the coming of the Christ and the new time that was at hand. They saw something holy in him as he told them to repent, to change their ways, because while he baptized with water, the one coming after him would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

I don't know what you think, but I think whether it knows it or not, our society is in a desperate search for contact with the holy. You know what desperation looks like. Maybe you have a friend with a sister who is so desperate for love and so you can talk to her and talk to her but she will never be convinced that she should leave that deadbeat guy who gets drunk and beats her, who won't get a job, who treats her like garbage. She's so desperate for love that in her mind a no good man is better than no man. I think it is the same way when it comes to holiness. I think we live in a society that is so desperate for the holy that they will go to ridiculous lengths to have some contact with it. They will give their last dollar to some charismatic televangelist who knows how to quote some bible verses and shed some tears but whose only use for God is in knowing how rich God can make him. About forty years ago, there was a guy out in San Francisco whom so many people thought they saw something holy in, and he took them all the way to the jungles of South America where he eventually held them all at gunpoint and made them drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. If that's not desperation, I don't know what is.

I think John the Baptist reminds us that this holiness is what we are about in the church. We aren't here to entertain or to market ourselves to the public. We aren't here to add people to the roles just for the sake of adding them to the rolls. We are here to connect people to the holy presence of the divine. To this holy presence that the world is so desperate to find they will go to ridiculous lengths and make bad decisions in order to find it. Now, maybe you didn't come here to be connected with the holy. Maybe you came here just to make friends, or to be entertained, or maybe you even came here to laugh at all of us. I actually don't care why you came. Regardless of why you came, I hope you stay for the holiness. Come to make friends, but stay for the holiness. Come for the entertainment, stay for the holiness. Come for the laughter, stay for the holiness.

But I think there is something else John reminds us of, and that is that not only is the church a place to find the holy, but that anything we find that is in any way holy calls us to be holy ourselves. And isn't that also what we find in John. In his holiness, John the Baptist was not interested in being praised as holy, or applauded as holy. He didn't care that five or ten or a thousand people came out to see him. Nothing in his message had anything to do with wanting to be popular. He didn't even care about staying alive and so his message about justice and righteousness would eventually cost him his life. If John wanted praise and popularity he could have told people that he was the Christ if he wanted to, but he did not. Instead he said "One is coming after me the sandals of whom I am not worthy to carry." So people said "John what do we do to get ready for this one who is coming after you?" To the tax collectors he said "Don't charge people what they don't owe, be honest in your dealings with people." To soldiers he said "Be satisfied with your wages, and don't extort money from the very people you're

supposed to protect.” To all he said to get ready because the ax is lying at the root of the tree, and any tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

And maybe what that tells us is that in that desperate search for the holy if what we find does not also call us to lives of greater holiness, then we need to keep looking. If what we find says to us that all our evil ways, all our injustices, all our cruelties and selfishness, if it says to us that all this is just fine, then we need to keep looking. Or, if it says all this is just fine so long as we give our praise and service to that which we call holy, then we need to keep looking. It doesn't matter how beautiful and shiny what we find is, it doesn't matter how great it makes us feel, if it doesn't call us to a life of greater holiness within ourselves, then it isn't holy.

I hope that here at Northminster we are an answer to the holiness that this world is desperately looking for. And I hope we never stop hearing God's call to greater holiness through people like John the Baptist.