

Introduction to Public Work
Matthew 3:1-4:11; Mark 1:2-13; Luke 3:1-4:13
by Dellen Ludwig

For the last few weeks I have been going through the steps necessary to begin a new substitute teaching job. Beginning the challenges of a new job, or a new baby, or new responsibilities, we can feel unprepared and as if we were not ready. But today we learned how John the Baptist and Jesus interacted together to begin the new responsibilities God had prepared and appointed them to complete in their respective ministries.

Through John's ministry of preparation, Jesus is introduced to Israel to begin his public ministry. Through his baptism he was washed and anointed. Through his temptation he was initiated into the weakness of humanity that he might fill his position as our sympathetic high priest.

The book of Mark, in chapter and verse one puts it this way: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." the word Mark used that we have translated here as "good news" has also been translated in some versions as "the gospel." It was indeed good news that Messiah, the Christ had finally come. Those years of silence we have heard about were now over. The long awaited Messiah, the promised one had been born. Now begins the account of his introduction to all of Israel and the amazing life he would live to present himself as the Savior.

God had a very special method of introducing his Son into the unique position he would fulfill. He had promised exactly the way he would let everyone know. Isaiah foretold, about 500 years beforehand, “A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'”

[Isaiah 40:3-5]

Matthew begins chapter 3 by saying: “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea.” The important job that John had been born to do, had arrived. He had been raised by a mother and father of faith. He had been instructed about his miraculous birth by his parents, Elizabeth and Zachariah. Then, he had gone out into the wilderness at a young age to ponder the scriptures about his ministry and coming Messiah. Luke 1:80 revealed, “And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.”

How did John know it was time to begin his public ministry?

God let him know when it was time. Luke explained that it was, “In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip

tetrarch of Iturea and Traconius, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” [Luke 3:1-3]

Politically, things were a mess from Israel's point of view. They were occupied by Rome secularly. Pontius Pilate was appointed Governor over Judea by Caesar. But Rome had appointed Herod the Great's sons to sub- rule as tetrarchs over various regions, being at least partially Jewish. But these sons were living morally decadent lives. And, to make matters worse, Herod had appointed a second high priest, Caiaphas while the existing high priest Annas, his father-in-law, still lived! By Jewish law, the office of high priest was for life. But in this politically messy time, God inspired John to begin. This was calculated to be around AD 29.

John came on the public scene like one of the prophets of old. Mark described him in chapter 1, verse 6: “John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” He shouted to the many travelers coming by the well-used Jordan River route, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” [Matthew 3:2] “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” [Mark 1:4]

Now you may have wondered how preaching repentance was the same as making crooked paths straight, as Isaiah had

prophesied his herald would do.

Matthew Poole explains it this way: “Kings and princes coming (especially with armies) have usually some coming before them as pioneers (we would call them a corp of engineers), to prepare their way, by leveling rough places and removing whatsoever is in the way of their motions, and filling up holes and ditches. ...John is here to set out as a harbinger to Christ, to prepare his way, or a pioneer...to make rough places smooth, and every way to prepare the way for him.” John was the “engineer” who had been sent to prepare the spiritual road in the hearts of the nations ahead of the coming Messiah.

That such preparation was necessary was in doubt by very few of his hearers. The word spread quickly, and people who listened heard John's dire warnings: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” [Luke 3:7,8a] ... “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” [Luke 3:9]

The regular person hearing this tirade would fully recognize their sinfulness. They were familiar with Jewish law and the moral code that society said they should live by, and knew they had fallen short. They were the ones who asked, “What should we do then?” [Luke 3:10] Matthew recorded that these “People went out

to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” [Matthew 3:5,6]

The part of the Jordan River nearest Jerusalem was also near Jericho. This was a well-used ford across the river. John could baptize the people in water that was not too deep. The word translated “baptize” here is from the Greek word “baptizo” which originally meant to immerse. It was also used outside of scriptures to describe the act of dying fabric. The cloth was immersed into water for a while, and lifted out, when it had taken on the properties of the dye.

John was immersing people who came to him. It appears that they confessed their sins and then John would dunk them into the river's water and bring them out as a sign of their leaving behind the habits of their selfish old lives, and taking on the characteristics of a new way of living. The word for repentance implies a change of doing things – to stop doing wrong and begin doing right. So, as the people stayed to hear John's preaching, he began to add how this new way of living would show in their lives.

Did you ask yourself what you needed to do as we studied this portion? I did. When we looked at the sinless birth of Jesus, our own sin-full-ness hangs heavily upon our own hearts. We cannot do anything to cleanse ourselves. That is why He was born

- to die for that sin; to pay the price for all the wrong or lack of good we have done. Colossians 2:12 equates the baptism we now experience with the finished work of Christ: “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Just as the people coming to John confessed their sin, so must each person down through the ages since his time. Just as they were immersed in the water of the Jordan, so must we demonstrate our heart change through water baptism, taking on the properties of Christ's remission of sins. After his resurrection, Jesus taught his disciples that baptism would be a basic tenet of Christianity. He said, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

[Matthew 28:19,20] Jesus commanded that believers be baptized.

John challenged his listeners to repent, and be baptized as an outward demonstration of the inward change of heart. Then he challenged all who would hear to change their lives as further testimony that they were ready to receive their Messiah. Luke in chapter 3 lists several changes John challenged the people to make: verse 11 – People should share their plenty with those who have

nothing; vs. 13 – Tax collectors should not collect more than they are required to; vs. 14 Soldiers should be content with their pay and not extort money or accuse people falsely. This is the “fruit in keeping with repentance.” (v. 8)

However, some of John's audience did not repent. A few felt they were already clean because of their strict adherence to the law and their heritage as Sons of Abraham. The Pharisees were the orthodox teachers of the law. They believed in the Judgment Day but thought the evil secular nations and obvious sinners such as tax collectors would be the ones judged. Sadducees were the more liberal sect, and did not even believe in an afterlife, much less a Judgment Day, unless it was for the evil secular nations of sinners who would implode because they did not follow the Mosaic Law. Of course, as Jews, their heritage would bring them blessings and honor when Messiah came. Neither group felt the need to repent nor that the dangers of coming judgment held any consequence for them.

John challenged their misconceptions. “And do not think you can 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, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” [Matt. 3:9,10] The nation of Israel was pictured as a tree

giving shade and life to the nations around it in the Old Testament. But John warns these religious leaders of Israel that God is ready to destroy all that they know in their nation and raise up an entirely new nation to be his people. This would be in fulfillment to God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through the Messiah, including you and me.

God demanded that his people not only repent, but live a changed life. That life must produce good fruit – character qualities such as, "...love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control..." [Galatians 5:22,23] Without that fruit, the ax would surely continue it's swing to bring utter destruction to the nation of Israel. Many scholars believe that this destruction fell when Rome invaded and tore down the Temple in 70 A.D. and the growth of the Gentile church. But when Christ Jesus died on the cross at the hand of these very same religious leaders, he paid for each and every sin of even these unrepentant men. He made a way of perfect remission of all sins, if each individual, Jew or not, would only take hold of that forgiveness through faith and be cleansed from sin.

In response to John's boldness to challenge their religious and even secular leaders such as Herod, the witnesses on the shore began to wonder if, perhaps John is our long awaited Messiah! [Luke 3:15-16] John was adamant that the One he was heralding

would be so much greater than himself; John, in contrast to Jesus, would be the most lowly of servants. In the days of John, as the family would return from their busy day, walking on dirt roads or even from working out in their fields, they would have the newest servant, of least prestige in the household, at the door to untie sandals, remove them and wash each person's feet before one entered the home. This is how John viewed his position and ministry in comparison to the One he represented.

John's ministry of baptism in water, was preparing hearts so people would live better lives, to the best of their ability. But the promised One would baptize them with fire. In Matthew 3:11 & 12, John goes on to say, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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." With Messiah's baptism, He will immerse believers in the Holy Spirit, who will have the power to change the sinful habits we have, from the inside out. The chaff that is utterly destroyed represents any habits that do not please God. The Spirit gives us the power to replace those bad habits with good habits, and in turn produce the fruit of the Spirit in changed lives.

Can you imagine how excited the people were as they came day after day and heard these amazing declarations from John?

The way was being prepared and Messiah's arrival was imminent! They could hardly wait! But they had no idea that they might actually witness the beginning of the anointed One's ministry right there at the edge of the Jordan.

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” [Mark 1:9] One by one, people had stepped out into the water to be baptized by John. He attended to each one. He heard their confessions of sin and immersed them all. When suddenly, his cousin, Jesus stepped into the river and approached John for his own baptism. But John was shaken, and objected: “But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness!' Then John consented.” [Matthew 3:14,15]

Why should Jesus participate in John's baptism of repentance? He himself was sinless. Peter later witnessed, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” [1 Peter 2:22] Therefore Jesus was not coming to John to repent of sin. Jesus admonished that this was important so that they would, “fulfill all righteousness.” There were many prophesies in the Old Testament that the Christ would fulfill. But none included a baptism of repentance. However, Isaiah 61:1 prophesies about Messiah that, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because

the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.”

As John proceeded to immerse Jesus in the water, and raise him out again, both he and Jesus experienced that anointing. “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighted on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' [Matthew 3:16,17] God the Father chose John's baptism as the official moment for anointing His Son to the ministry of redemption. Notice that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were present. God the Father in all of His fullness chose to announce the long awaited Messiah, His Son, to his people, through the touch of His Holy Spirit.

God announced Jesus as his son, not the product of an illegitimate liaison. He affirmed that Jesus was loved by the Father. He anointed his ministry as one pleasing to God's purposes for mankind. Afterward, John the Baptist taught those who followed him, “I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel....I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy

Spirit! I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.”

[John 1:31-34]

And so, Jesus' ministry began. At about thirty years old, he is pronounced to be the Messiah. But unlike the Messiah the Jews expected, Jesus did not march into Jerusalem to rally his people into a rebellion that would lead to world dominance. Rather, “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” [Matthew 4:1] Luke speaks of this decision in this way, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.” [Luke 4:1,2]

Luke's account suggests that the devil was tempting Jesus the whole time. If a busy schedule causes even one meal to be skipped, I easily get tired and cranky enough to be tempted and fall toward high calorie snacking. Our enemy knows our weaknesses and knows the buttons to push, and the many opportunities he can take advantage of to tempt us. But our heavenly Father knows our weaknesses too. “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” [1 Corinthians 10:13] Jesus demonstrated that “way out” as he

himself was tempted during those 40 days.

Matthew 4:3-10 and Luke 4:3-12 both record specific temptations that Jesus endured. The devil enticed Jesus to satisfy his physical needs, his prophesied purpose, and his promised adoration. But the Lord Jesus did not give in to the “easy way” Satan offered. Rather he relied on the truth of Scripture as his sword to hack his “way out” of the weeds of Satan's camouflaged lies.

First, the devil enticed Jesus to satisfy his intense hunger by using the power of the Holy Spirit to do a miracle. Satan pointed to the many rocks in the barren soil of their wilderness setting and challenged Jesus to turn them into rolls of bread. Jesus was the Creator of the universe. How easy it would be for him to satiate the physical gnawing in his stomach by exchanging just a few of those rocks for bread.

However, Jesus knew that this Spirit led isolation, although physically challenging, must accomplish His Father's preparation in his body and soul for his ministry to come. So, his answer was to challenge Satan's lying emphasis on the physical, by reminding him of the spiritual dimension his Father desired as most important. He quoted scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3 saying, “He (God) humbled you causing you to hunger, and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to

teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Matthew and Luke presented the next two temptations, but in different order. Matthew appears, by the use of his words, to be accounting the temptations in chronological order, while Luke may have placed them in order of their severity. However both of the following were intense and merely samples of how the devil hounded Jesus with his twisted logic.

Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem, the holy city, to the highest point of the temple to tempt him about the purpose Messiah was to fulfill for his chosen people. He tried the same tactic Jesus used. He quoted scripture. Psalm 91:10, 11 and 12 prophesy that God has promised His protection for those who “make the Most High their dwelling.” (v. 9) “no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike you foot against a stone.” To throw himself down from the heights of the most public place in Jerusalem, only to be caught by angels before the altar would be a more miraculous entrance on the public than his baptism. Satan lied that by choosing the “easy way”, Jesus could be hailed as Messiah and start from this fantastic event to fulfill God's plan.

However, Satan very carefully stopped his quote before verse

13. “You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.” Genesis 3:14, 15 prophesied, after the first sin, to Satan, “So the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Messiah's purpose was not to have people “oo and ah” over his miraculous power, that is why he came as a man. The Father wanted Messiah to redeem mankind from the power of sin and eternal death. That was his prophesied purpose. Only by moving inevitably on toward the cross would Jesus conquer death and defeat Satan with the crushing head-wound by His life-giving resurrection. Jesus' answered, “It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'” This had to make Satan cower. He was trying to manipulate the One true God not a “self called” god like himself! No created being has the authority to do such a thing.

But Satan was not deterred. Finally, he tested Jesus by tempting him to jump ahead to satisfy his promised adulation as King of Kings. Satan challenged, “All this I will give you,..if you will bow down and worship me.” [Matt. 4:9] The earth did not belong to Satan. Psalm 24:1 confirms, “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.” Satan is merely a

usurper, claiming this planet as his own. He seeks to devour all who live in it. But if he could get Jesus to jump to being an earthly king over other kings by bowing down and worshiping him, Satan would have accomplished his life-long desire – to be like God, and mankind would be doomed to eternal separation by having no Savior.

The Lord Jesus brought an end to this season of temptation by exclaiming, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'” Exodus 20:2-5 states the first of the ten commandments God gave for his people to follow. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...”

Throughout the history of man, we have been tempted to worship something, anything other than the Lord God. The people of Israel began with a golden calf. Nebuchadneezel introduced a golden statue. Today we worship gold, (or money); and the power it represents. How seductive the lure is to live to work rather than work to live. We rationalize that we are providing for our families. But are we working those extra hours at the cost of the spiritual training of our children? Those possessions we crave will only fill

our hearts with the desire for more. But our spiritual lives are that which is eternal.

We worship fame, adoration, a following; all of which point to perhaps the worship of ourselves! The devil promises the desires of our heart. We can be happy if we follow his methods for the praise of others. But Satan's temptations do not yield their promised reward nor do the ends of our sin give us a better life.

James, the brother of Jesus, challenges us “but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” [James 1:14,15] Listening to the devil will only grant the full blown result of death – eternal separation from God. Jesus offered life, life that is eternal. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” [John 3:16]

That was the purpose prophesied and promised to us. That was why Jesus did not succumb to Satan's temptations. Hebrews 12:2 challenges us to follow His example. “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Because the joy he pursued was not his own as offered by Satan, but our salvation from our sins so that we could

enjoy life forever with him.

Finally, we learned that Satan did leave Jesus as he had been commanded. Luke's record adds: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." [Luke 4:13] We will study how the devil used the religious leaders, the challenges of his neighbors, his own family and Jesus' humanness throughout his life to tempt Jesus to shift away from his purpose of salvation. But by denying himself in each temptation, he not only remained to be a sinless sacrifice for our sins at the end of his life, but also an understanding high priest for us, now.

Hebrews 4 & 5 compared the office of high priest in Israel to Jesus' position as our High Priest. Although the religious rulers of Jesus' time felt the pride of feeling best able to keep God's commandments, they had to acknowledge their sins by giving regular sacrifices for their own sins, to keep the law. However, their smug pride kept them aloof from the people. But Jesus was sinless by never giving in to any temptation. Yet, in verse 15, it is recorded, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin."

To understand this, let's consider an example from the many hurricanes we have had this season. The news cameras have shown us terrifying pictures of the force of hurricanes Harvey, Irma and

Maria. So many trees were thrashed by 150 mile per hour winds, it is a wonder that any remained standing after the storms passed. The news cameras again showed us trees blown down across streets, onto power lines and smashing cars; however, nearby there were other trees still standing. Both trees went through the same pressure to give and break. But while some succumbed and fell, others withstood the full storm and did not fall.

Which tree took the most pressure? Those that rode out the storm but did not fall knew the worst the storm had to give. Likewise, Jesus rode out the full onslaught of Satan's temptations, and through it all, he did not sin. So, he can sympathize with our weakness. He has seen it all and knows how intense that temptation we face truly can be. But He has given us His Word and His Spirit to help us combat that temptation, and to find our escape!

We read in James 4:7 "Submit yourselves, then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." Jesus resisted the devil, all the way to the cross. He encourages us through his word that by coming near to him, He will be near and help us to resist Satan's temptations too. The "tree" that made it through the worst Satan could throw at it, can be the cross that keeps us progressively stronger through our own temptations.

God is a promise keeper.

God is holy and pure.

God is our Redeemer.

God is our Help in time of trouble.