

## “Watchman, Tell Us Of The Night”

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Mark 1:1-8 = anticipation

Charlton Heston in his autobiography<sup>1</sup> tells about when he first heard that George Stevens wanted him to be in the movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Heston’s agent said: “This is a big picture, Chuck, really big ~ *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. George wants you to play John the Baptizer. It’s the lead!”



Heston thought a bit and replied: “Tell Mr. Stevens I’ll be glad to talk to him about the part, but trust me, John the Baptizer in not the lead in any movie called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.”

Charlton Heston may be faulted for many things, but here his Biblical knowledge is impeccable: John is not the lead. On the other hand, all four Gospels begin with John. Just so in our text from Mark today, but John is not the lead.

John is the perennial second fiddle ~ eternally relegated to saying “heeeeere’s Jesus” ~ the straight man who cannot ever, ever outshine the star. Always the groomsman, never the groom.



Nevertheless, John is incredibly important in God’s plan. John is a prophet, a watchman of Israel. The watchman is the one who stands on the parapet peering into the night to warn of impending danger. John willingly takes on that role ~ watchman, prophet, forerunner, predecessor.

While only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, include the birth of Jesus, all four Gospels begin the ministry of Jesus with John. John is clearly an important figure albeit a passing one: wild-eyed, radical John ~ a prophet reminiscent of Elijah ~ ascetic.



Someone has compiled a David Letterman type list of the Top Ten Complaints from Biblical Mothers. Cut to #1:

- The #1 complaint from a Biblical mother: Elizabeth to John, “I cook you a nice meal and all you want to eat is locust, locust, locust.”

Today we look to John and ask of him: “Watchman, tell us of the night.” And his answer coming back to us, involves two parts, both forms of anticipation:

First John proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins:”<sup>2</sup> a command to “get yourselves ready:”

“Get ready for the main event.”

“Get ready for God’s realm.”



How do we get ready? John is absolutely clear what it takes to enter God’s realm: “Repent your sins!”

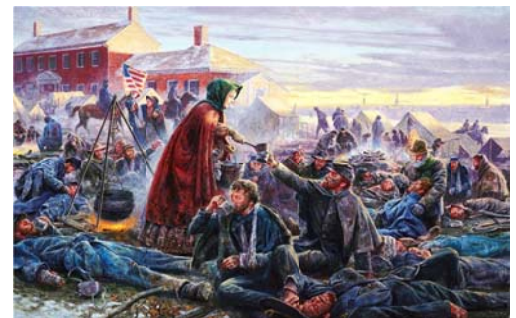
Tough words! What do we have to do to repent our sins? John goes on to explain in more detail in Matthew and Luke than he does in the Gospel of Mark:



“*Be forgiven ~ and forgive!*” In the Lord’s prayer, remember that we say “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” We are forgiven in proportion to how we forgive ~ contingent.

Forgiveness is a critical part, if not the critical part of God’s story ~ forgiveness all around. We tend to rush past it. We tend to diminish its significance. This forgiveness and repentance piece is not anywhere near as easy or as facile as we make it out to be.

Clara Barton, the “battlefield angel” of the Civil War was founder of the American Red Cross. One time she was conversing with an old friend who had been with her thru the horrors of trying to save lives in the midst of carnage. The friend reminded the famous nurse of a time years earlier when Clara Barton had been the victim of a vicious act of hatred. When Clara acted surprised and unaware



that such an incident had ever taken place, the friend said, “Don’t you remember that?” Clara replied, “No, I distinctly remember forgetting it!”



John is spot on ~ becoming a part of God’s realm and reign demands a particularly difficult kind of forgiveness. John asks us tough questions:

“Have you repented? Have you received forgiveness?”

More to the point: “Have you offered forgiveness to those who have wronged you?”

“Are you able to forgive and really forget?”

**T**hose among us like Clara Barton, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other saints who do accomplish great things, these are those who can actually forgive and forget. Like Clara Barton, we must consciously make it happen ~ we must cultivate the habit of grace-filled forgetfulness toward wrongs done to us.

Nelson Mandela who lived forgiveness on a national scale has said:

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”



This is a critical path for everyone who desires to be a part of God’s plan. One of the reasons we do not accomplish great things, do not enter God’s realm, is not so much because of our lack of being forgiven, but because of our inability to forgive.



John is spot on. One of the cardinal signs of spiritual and moral maturity is the ability to give and to receive forgiveness ~ not holding grudges ~ not rejoicing even in the justified suffering of others.

Conversely the inability to practice forgiveness is a cardinal sign of spiritual immaturity. We think in holding grudges that we are somehow punishing another person, but in reality we are just destroying our own soul’s chances. In order to fully experience God’s compassion we need to

learn to practice that compassion ourselves. That's what John and Jesus mean by repentance, sincere repentance.

John's second answer to our query "Watchman tell us" also involves anticipation. John proclaims that "a greater one" comes after him.



While the Gospels of Mark and John stress the discontinuity between John and Jesus, Matthew and Luke emphasize the continuity between them. There John's pronouncement and Jesus' preaching are word for word the same: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near."

Both John and Jesus are commanding "Be ready!" Both are voices in the wilderness crying: "prepare the way of the LORD." Both are commanding us "get your lives straight like a highway for our God."

Thus, "the journey" is an apt description of the faith. The Bible describes the faith-filled as "people of the Way." We are to be people on the way, the straightway in the desert ~ we are the highway for our God ~ like Abraham and Sarah never settled, always moving towards God's goal.



John the Baptizer invites us on this journey. Jesus, the "one coming after and greater than" John, invites us on this journey. Neither one invites us to the broad and well-travelled way, but rather both invite us into the "Way of the LORD" which has a "narrow gate and a hard road which leads to life."<sup>3</sup> Somewhere along the path, every human journey involves many crossroads ~ turn right or turn left ~ multiple crossroads, multiple choices.

We very much want to be "the people of God's Way." The road we seek is the hard road by the narrow gate ~ not the easy choices but the best choices which lead to life abundant, life for the ages, eternal life. We relish that journey.

"Watchman, tell us" we ask of John. His answer: "Be ready." "Be ready for something wonderful, marvelous which God is doing. Be

ready by seeking God's kingdom. Be ready by striving for spiritual maturity. Be ready by cultivating a forgiving spirit and so being forgiven. Be ready for an even greater one than John, even greater things are coming."

What is coming? What is our watchman John preparing us for? We could almost sing:<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> *In The Arena* (1995)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:14

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 40:5