



Sermon delivered by
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Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
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“Is John the Baptist *Heard*, Today?”

(Mark 1: 4-11)

There is a member of this church family who enjoys talking. That person enjoys talking so much it is hard, at times, to get a word in edgewise. But that’s okay because I, for one, enjoy listening to that person. I don’t often hear this as I once did, but there are some people who are “conversationalists,” people who have a knack for carrying on a spirited and informative and engaging conversation. Now, I know other people, and so do you, who are to be avoided because they are hard to talk to, even harder to listen to, and I am pleased to announce that people like that are not to be found here at Quail Hollow Church. They used to be here, but we gave them to the Episcopalians.

Having a voice in the conversation is a good thing. Having your voice heard when you have something to say can be helpful to others. And hearing a voice you need to hear, a voice you may not have expected to hear can be a god-send. Let me ask if this happens to you? Your phone rings, and the person calling doesn’t announce who they are; they just begin talking, but you know who it is; you recognize the caller by the sound of the voice.

I think and I do believe the Lord operates under the same assumption. When the Lord speaks to you and me, I don’t think the Lord needs to tell us Who it is. I think and I do believe the Lord’s voice is unmistakable. We know that voice, don’t we? And when the Lord speaks, something deep within us sits up and pays attention. That has happened to me countless times, and I know it has happened to many of you, as well. I am willing to believe that the Lord is more often ignored than listened to and obeyed. For some reason, you and I have been given the choice, the free will to turn off the volume when certain voices speak to us, and that includes the voice of the Lord. There have been times we have ignored the Lord when the Lord has spoken, and instead we have listened to and obeyed whom? Ourselves.

St. Mark tells us about two important voices. The **first** voice is the voice of John the Baptist. As you may recall, John and Jesus were cousins. They were related through their mothers, and over time John had come to know about Jesus. One day, when the time was

right, John the Baptist announced for all to hear that Jesus was on His way, and that Jesus would be arriving with power, with life-changing power, with the kind of power unequaled here on earth. And John tells the people they need to be ready to face such power. And guess what? The people listened to John, and the people responded to his voice. St. Mark reports that “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John” to be baptized in the Jordan River, where I will be in a few short days.

What is interesting about Mark’s report is that John’s voice was *heard*. In those days, there was only one voice you needed to hear and to listen to and to obey, and that was the voice of Rome, of Caesar. Of course, the Jewish leaders had a voice in the conversation, but the voice that really counted, the voice not to be missed was Rome’s voice, and that voice came through Rome’s local franchise by the name of King Herod. What is interesting is that John’s voice was heard, and heard over Rome’s voice. Mark reports that people from the city and the countryside heard John’s voice, and if both city and countryside were responding then Jesus *was* the talk of the town, which was, of course, John’s ministry.

In today’s culture, in today’s world of urgent and pressing news, from among all the voices heard in any single day, do think John’s voice would be heard in our day? It would be nice to believe that John would be heard, but I doubt it. John’s voice spoke a particular and contrary message. John told the people a message of repentance, to turn their lives around and to turn towards God and God’s Kingdom. John’s voice spoke of a baptism of repentance, and he left no doubt about it: all people needed to come clean with their lives and to begin anew, but this time with less self and more God, this time with faith in the God Who had been born in Bethlehem.

Let me tell you of a moment from last fall. Someone asked me why we baptize children and adults. That person wanted to know the meaning and the purpose of baptism. I told that person that baptism is God’s way of welcoming us into God’s holy family, and that to be a member of God’s family you have to be cleansed and stripped of the ways of the world. You have to confess that you are a sinner, and that no more do you seek to live by the ways of the world; instead, you desire to live according to God’s rules, according to the rules Jesus came to teach and tell us about, the rules that point us to how good life was intended to be for human beings everywhere. That person smiled, and replied, *What if you don’t have anything to confess? What if you are not a sinner?* That response caught me by surprise, and I paused before making my reply. I paused because I thought I had misheard that person, but I had not misheard that person. I told that person that sin is defined by living one’s life according to

one's self-desire. I said, sin is living in opposition to the life God offers in Jesus Christ. I said that, and then I paused for a response, and I got one. The response was: *I'm not a sinner.*

That response continues to echo in my ear. What a confession to make! *I am not a sinner.* St. Mark tells us that few people, if any, were thinking that way, way back then. People from the countryside, people from the city, people not so unlike you and me were confessing with their feet that they were what? Sinners! And they wanted to do something about it, and when they heard John's voice they knew exactly what needed to happen.

Let's make sure no one is assuming anything but what is true when it comes to baptism. When you are baptized, once you have made the confession that Christ is Lord of your life, you become, there and then, a "forgiven" sinner. You are no longer just a sinner; you are a "forgiven" sinner. Every day you wake up, you wake up a "forgiven" sinner. Now, I think I may know what you are thinking. There is a population out there of lapsed but "forgiven" sinners. There are those who once made the good confession, but they have drifted away from God. Make no mistake, they are *still* "forgiven" sinners, no matter how disappointing they may be to the Lord and to the church. They are still "forgiven," even in the eyes of their Saviour. And why they have drifted away is the "\$54 question," especially when you consider the **second** voice Mark tells us about.

On the day John baptizes his cousin, Jesus, a voice from heaven is heard to say, *You are my Son, my Beloved Son; and with You I am well pleased.* Now, listen to every word I am about to say: Those words once spoken about Jesus are also spoken about us, you and me. In our baptism, our heavenly Father speaks those words about us. God finds us worthy. We share the same worthiness God sees in Jesus. And, thus, we are worthy of Jesus' sacrifice, worthy of that meal over there. In God's eyes, we are worthy to receive that which was given on our behalf. In God's eyes, that is just the beginning of what God longs to give to us, which is why I am dumbfounded as to why some members of the family drift away, why some go looking for someone and something else.

You and I are loved by a God Who thinks we're worthy, we're deserving of heaven's most extravagant blessings, of which the chief blessing is Jesus Christ. Our baptism is God's guarantee that those blessings will never be revoked. They will always, *always* be ours. And before we receive that blessing, let's remind ourselves of why the Lord has made His blessings available to us. I ask you three questions, and by your response you will be renewing your baptismal promise to be a full and active member of God's family here at Quail Hollow Church.

So then, I ask you to stand, and I ask you to respond to these three questions: *Do you turn from sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Do you? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him, and only Him, as Lord and Saviour? Do you? And, will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying His Word and revealing His love?* Will you be that kind of disciple? You may be seated. Now, remember your baptism and be thankful, be very thankful. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Speak to us, O God, of the marvelous ways You are inviting us into conversation with Your Son. Thank You for declaring us worthy of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thank You for allowing us to be Your mouthpiece so others, *many* others may come to know what You have made known through faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of this earthly life. Amen.