




RETELLING THE STORY SERIES

RUSS RAMSEY



THE ADVENT
OF THE
LAMB OF GOD

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BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:29-34

HE DID NOT HAVE A HOME.

People said he survived on little more than wild honey and locusts, and by the look of him, it couldn't have been much more. He wore a coat of camel hair he cinched together with a leather belt, just like the prophet Elijah had done.

Normally he was the one people stopped to behold, but at this particular moment, as he stood waist-deep in the Jordan, anyone looking at him saw that his attention was fixed on the man from Galilee headed his way. His face wore a mix of astonishment and joy as the man approached.

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” His voice trembled as water dripped from his outstretched finger and scraggly beard into the river where he stood.

People might have dismissed this wild man as they would have any other tortured soul driven to live in the caves and wadis of the Judean wilderness—were it not for the fact that people knew his story. Or rather, they knew his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

These were honorable people. Zechariah had served many years as a priest in the temple, Elizabeth faithfully at his side in spite of the fact that, well into their old age, they had been unable to conceive any children.

Being a priest, Zechariah knew the old stories of the barren women God had worked through to deliver impossible promises to an unbelieving people—to their people. When Zechariah and his wife were young, these tales gave them hope. God could break through her barrenness if he wanted. He had done it before. But that was a long time ago, and the stories were about people whose lives were central to Israel's identity. Zechariah and his wife hardly regarded themselves as that important.

Eventually they accepted that they would be childless, though they wondered why the God they loved and served had determined, in his infinite wisdom, that they wouldn't know the blessing of children.

Then one day the Lord sent his angel down with a message. The Author of Life was going to open Elizabeth's womb and give Zechariah a son. But this son wasn't given merely for his father's legacy. This boy would have a specific function in the unfolding story the people of Israel had been living and telling as far back as anyone could remember.

The angel told them, "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. He will make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

And they were to give him the name John.

As a boy, John grew and became strong in the Spirit. His little mind was filled with wonder as he turned over the stories his parents told him about his birth. Angels were involved, and miracles. He was their miracle, a gift given by God himself not only to his grateful parents, but to the world. Everyone knew John as the boy with an intensity beyond his years—as though his entire boyhood was a time of preparation and he knew it.

Not long after the boy became a man, he moved out into the wilderness of Judea. It was an inhospitable place—windy, craggy, and hot. It was also the sort of place where God had dwelt with his ancestors during the exodus. There, without the simplest of creature comforts, John was left to find solace and companionship in God alone.

Though his days in the desert could be lonesome to the point of pain, wilderness life suited him. It was a contemplative way to live but one that strengthened him. He had no basic needs that he could not meet. Many of his days were filled with simple tasks such as finding water, scrounging for food, staying out of the heat of the sun, and gathering wood for fires at night. Living off the land meant he needed to travel light. He needed to be able to go where the resources could be found and move on when they were spent.

But it wasn't just minimalist living that brought John to the desert; it was his call from the Lord to proclaim the message he had been born to tell. John didn't move to the desert to withdraw from his people. He went to prepare for his role among them.

Soon he emerged as a man with a voice and a clear conscience about how to use it. Wild and fearless, looking like he had grown out of the banks on which he stood, he called to all who passed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" And he did it as one who seemed to possess the authority to demand such a response.

He was, as the prophet Isaiah had said, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.’”

Prepare for what? A collision of worlds. Like a meteor falling to the earth, heaven was bearing down on the land of John’s forefathers. An old promise, so old that it had become little more than a legend, was about to be fulfilled—and nothing would ever be the same.

The Messiah was coming.

The very fact that so many people considered the Messiah’s coming more of a fairy tale than a future event was, in itself, a cause for repentance. It wasn’t just that God had promised to do it. It was that the reason he promised to do it was like an intimate promise between lovers. God’s promised Messiah was a merciful gift of love to a people who needed both mercy and love. He would come to them in all their pain, brokenness, and struggles and make everything new. They were desperate for this, and the proof of their desperation was perhaps most evident in the fact that they couldn’t bring themselves to live as though this promise was real.

Repent! The kingdom of heaven is at hand!

There was something magnetic about John, something in the way he suspended those he attracted between the poles of preparation and perdition until they understood that without repentance, there they would hover—not necessarily feeling lost, perhaps, but not assured that they were found either. Hope began to rise in the hearts of the hopeless. Even in the call to repent they heard the promise that if they confessed their sins, admitted their doubts, and acknowledged how their hearts had become cynical and jaded, God would hear them. God would hear them.

People came from all over to the Jordan to step into that water with John the Baptizer. They confessed their failures, their lust, their greed, their pride. They admitted to him things they swore they would never tell a soul.

But why? Who was he?

Israel's religious leaders had no answer, so they sent priests to investigate. Did this man think he was the Messiah? Or Elijah come back from his celestial chariot ride?

John was clear in his answer. He was neither Elijah nor the Messiah.

So the priests asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John told them, "I baptize with water because there is a man, one who stands among you, and the strap of his sandal I'm not worthy to untie. Though you do not know him, he lives among us even now, and he is the Messiah!"

Should they have known him? Or, if nothing else, should they not have been surprised at John's rebuke? These were the priests of Israel, experts in the law and lore of God's chosen people. Israel was a nation with a story, a well-rehearsed narrative these priests were sworn to preserve and pass down. John himself was a part of that tale, and so were they. And yet, like so many of their countrymen, they had begun to forget the story of God's promises to them.

But it was such a beautiful story. It was the story of how their holy God had cut a covenant promise in blood to redeem and restore the children who had rebelled against him. It was the story of how Jacob's line came to be a nation—sometimes mighty, sometimes fragile, but always prone to wander and forget their God.

It was the story of generations of war, infighting, and exile that should have wiped them off the face of the earth. The fact that they survived all this and much more testified to God's fidelity to his promise never to leave them or forsake them. That alone proved God was not through with the story he was writing. And if that was true, it meant he wasn't through with them either.

Even though it was still unfolding, it was already quite a story to tell, and it was the priests' job to tell it. But in order to tell it, they had to know it. And to know it, they had to listen—which was why, since their earliest recorded history, every time the people of Israel gathered before the Lord for worship, the first word spoken to them was a command:

“Hear!”

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