

Today we're looking at an encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist where John the Baptizer famously took Jesus into the water in Matthew's gospel (3:13-17)

13 Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to talk him out of it. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?" 15 But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." So John agreed to baptize him. 16 After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

That must have been quite the moment. Put yourself in John's shoes. You're the one who gets to baptize the Messiah. Emmanuel- God With Us- comes to you in the water, and you lower Him down and raise Him back up and then the heavens open and a heavenly voice declares, "This is my Son who brings me great joy!"

Listen I have had the opportunity to baptize some people in my time as a pastor, and Freeman Pond last weekend was a great experience- it was- but John's moment in the Jordan River with Jesus might top it just a little. Ha!

This week we begin the third section of our Garden to City journey. In 2016 we are moving through the Bible from beginning to end. We spent our winter in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Then we spent the spring looking at God's people, Israel, as they go through their ups and downs. Now, at last, we enter into the New Testament, and for the rest of the summer we will be in the Gospels taking a look at the life of Jesus. The title of our series is Moment of Truth, because each week we're going to see Jesus interact with another person and change their lives forever.

You're familiar with what it means to have a moment of truth, aren't you? It's that moment when something that had been hidden is finally revealed; when something that needed to be said is finally spoken; it's that point in your life when you realized that you needed to head in another direction so you changed course and started moving down that new path. Have you experienced a moment like that?

I've had a few of those moments, myself. But the one that stands out for me has to be the day that my future wife explained that she wanted to be in a relationship with me. Not just friends- more! Whoohoo! That was a show-stopper Moment of Truth in my life. You have to understand, I had been pursuing Jennifer for three and a half years before we reached that glorious day. My senior year of college she and one of her friends started coming over to the house where I lived with six of my best friends. We called the house the Vatican because we were all single guys.

When Jennifer showed up it was over for me. I was smitten. Head over heels- the whole deal. We would all stay up and talk until late in the night as a group and I would volunteer to take Jennifer home and we would talk some more. I thought, "This girl is amazing. She's beautiful and smart and fun to be around. She loves Jesus- she's perfect." And the more time we spent together the more I just knew that something was happening between us. There was a spark. I just knew it. So, one night, I laid my heart out there on my sleeve and explained that I wanted us to be more than just friends. And Jennifer very quickly clarified that we were just friends. Aughh!

I remember getting really upset. "How could I have misread things? I was sure that she felt the same way!" I spent some time sulking, but then I got over it and thought, "you know, we do make really good friends..." and before long things were back to the way they were before. Every six months or so I

would get convinced that something more was clearly between us, and Jennifer would very swiftly correct that notion. Three and a half years this went on. Just friends. We're just friends!

Finally, I came to a place where I was content to just be friends. That was no small feat, because I'd been carrying a torch for Jennifer as long as I'd known her. But when I honestly arrived at a place where I just wanted to be her friend and nothing more, that's the moment when things shifted. She came out to visit me at the church where I was working in North Carolina and we hung out just as friends- no pressure from me; no ulterior motives. It was great. I remember thinking, "See, this is how it's supposed to be and I'm ok with that." Then I got the Moment of Truth phone call. Jennifer called and I remember that she said something along the lines of: "So, you know how you've had these feelings for me for all these years but I never felt the same way toward you? Now I feel like things have reversed and I have feelings for you, but I'm not sure you feel the same way about me."

What?! Are you serious?! Heavens part. Music plays. It's the moment of truth for Jennifer and I and do you know what I said to her? "Can you hang on a second, I need to call you back." Ha! I'm not even joking. I hung up the phone and did a happy dance around my apartment. I sat down and wrote a note to her right then and there expressing my sheer joy that she actually saw me as more than just a friend. And then, when I couldn't stand it any longer, I called her back and told her that I felt exactly the same way that I always had about her. And we've been together ever since.

I share that story with you, because when you have a Moment of Truth experience it shifts your circumstances- it alters them so completely that now you mark time with that moment as a reference point. There was all that time before, and then THIS happened, along with everything else that followed. In this series of messages we are going to see that when people encounter Jesus in Scripture, often times it becomes a Moment of Truth for them that radically alters their lives.

That's exactly what happened for John the Baptist. He had a Moment of Truth with Jesus in the water of baptism and it changed the trajectory of his life, but probably not in the way that you might think.

When John encountered Jesus that day in the Jordan River, John was at the pinnacle of his ministry. He had crowds of people who were drawn to him for the power of his teaching. He had devoted followers who were eager to learn from the example of his life. John was granola before being granola was a thing. He lived out in nature, man. He ate wild honey and bugs and dressed in camel hair robes. He was counter-cultural. He was radical. When he baptized you, it was a baptism of repentance- a turning back to God's laws and God's ways. John had a huge platform of ministry when he experienced his Moment of Truth with Jesus in the Jordan river- he was wildly popular- but from that time on his following only diminished. The crowds got smaller and smaller and John's popularity and platform went with them.

Some of us have experienced this in our own relationship with Jesus. We chose to follow Him and the road didn't get easier, instead it became more difficult. Maybe you've faced more challenges and obstacles in the days since you gave your life to Christ than you ever had before that moment. Well, you're not alone. John experienced this too, and we can learn a lot from the way he responds.

John's closest followers were confused and upset by all of this. We read about their response in John's Gospel (3:26-30):

26 *So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us."*

27 John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. 28 You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' 29 It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. 30 He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

"He must increase and I must decrease." That's the translation I remember best. John had a Moment of Truth with Jesus and as a result, instead of rainbows and "happily ever after," John's own ministry begins to ebb and dwindle away as people who once crowded in to listen to him, now chose instead to follow the carpenter's son from Nazareth. But, instead of getting angry or bitter about all of this- instead of pitching a fit and having it out with this Jesus character like his friends undoubtedly want him to- John celebrates Jesus' success. "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." That's the heart of John.

It's exactly this kind of attitude that Jesus himself applauds when he said of John, *"I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist."* (Mt. 11:11)
What made John great? He knew the role God gave him to play and he played it with all of his heart. His job was to prepare the way for the Messiah and that's exactly what John did. John knew who he was. He wasn't the bridegroom, he was the bridegroom's friend, and he was: *"simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows."*

Many of us have a different understanding of what it means to be great. We think greatness comes when we succeed or when others recognize our accomplishments. If that's our understanding, we would be wise to learn from John. He was a great man not because of his own success, but because he knew who to champion. He was content to let Jesus be Leader and Lord. He prepared the way and then he got out of the way so that God could be God. Are we content to let God be God? Do we have the humility to let Him be our Leader and Lord?

John the Baptist was a great guy. When Jesus says you're a great guy, you're a great guy. But John wasn't made out of Teflon. He was human. He had doubts and fears, just like you and I do. He was there in the water with Jesus when the heavens declared, "This is my Son!" That was a Moment of Truth like no other, and he had the capacity to let Jesus succeed- he championed Jesus- and yet, when things got difficult in John's life, he still struggled to believe. We read about it in Matthew's Gospel (11:2-3)

2 John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, 3 "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?"

This is John at probably the lowest point in his life, reaching out to Jesus for confirmation that He was who John had believed Him to be.

John is in prison, and we later learn that he's not going to get out- he's beheaded out of spite for speaking about his convictions of faith. Listen, John understood that his role was to prepare the way for Jesus. He understood that he himself would not be the recipient of glory and adulation. What did he say to Jesus in the Jordan River? "I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you." John knew how to show deference. He had a humble heart. But here he is in prison, chained up, and he must be thinking, "Gee, I didn't think it would come to this! I know I said, 'He must increase and I must decrease,' but this is ridiculous!"

So John has a crisis of faith there in prison. He begins to have doubts about Jesus. "Surely if Jesus were

the Messiah, he wouldn't let me rot away in here. Surely if He really were the Son of God, He wouldn't stand for this." The man Jesus described as the greatest ever, had doubts about Jesus. What does this mean? If John the Baptist could have doubts, anybody can have doubts. John had spiritual doubts about Jesus and that means it's not necessarily a sign of moral or spiritual defect (to have doubts). And this is especially true when we suffer.

John is the latest in a long line of people in Scripture (Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, the Psalmists). There's a whole list of people in the Bible who fall into terrible suffering or difficulty and if you look at their prayers, to one degree or another they all say, "I'm have a lot of trouble believing in You, God." And yet there they are in Scripture.

Here's what's important to know. When Jesus receives John's questions, he doesn't dismiss John's doubting by saying, "How dare you doubt me! After all that you've seen and heard, how could you ever question who I am?!" That's not Jesus response. Instead we read what Jesus says in verse four:

(2 John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, 3 "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?")

4 Jesus told them, "Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen— 5 the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor." 6 And he added, "God blesses those who do not fall away because of me."

Hear me on this- when you consider not only Jesus response to John here in these verses, but also the way God responds throughout Scripture to the Jobs and Jeremiahs- you see that God is pretty understanding with doubts. Derek Kidner, a Bible commentator, says it this way, "The very presence of such (doubting) in Scripture is witness to God's understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate."

Harbor of Hope has always wanted to be a place where we could put out the welcome mat saying, "Doubters welcome." We want to be a place where a person can acknowledge- hey, in this day in age it's hard to believe. And we're patient and we're gentle because we know what it's like not to believe and to be assailed with doubts. I don't know of any thoughtful believer who hasn't had periods of time in their life when doubts crept in.

Look at Jesus attitude here in his response to John. On the one hand He doesn't say, "How dare you!?" But on the other hand he doesn't just give in to John's doubts either. He challenges the doubts of John. He pushes back. *4 Jesus told them, "Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen— 5 the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor." 6 And he added, "God blesses those who do not fall away because of me."*

This is a fantastic and challenging answer to John's question. When Jesus relays these details to John (the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear...) He's not just laying out the facts. Jesus is summarizing what the Old Testament Scriptures say about the Messiah. Listen to what it says in Isaiah 35:5-6, "*And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!*" There's also a reference here to Isaiah 61 that says when the Messiah comes He'll say, "*Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. The time of the Lord's favor has come.*"

What Jesus is saying to John is this, "Remember what you have read in the Scriptures. The Messiah will go to the weak (the blind, the lame, the poor), and that's what is happening." But that's not all that Jesus is saying. He's actually showing the contrast between the world's understanding of religion and salvation, and His own. John had slipped into the world's way of thinking. He thought that the Messiah would bring salvation in the present, bringing the strong and moral people together and giving them His help. But here's what Jesus is saying, "I welcome the weak. That's who I work with. The salvation I offer is not for the strong who believe they are worthy of it. No, my salvation comes through weakness to people who understand they are not worthy of it but trust me for it."

Don't you see? Jesus is our strong Messiah who became weak- he suffered, he died- so that in our weakness we could be made strong. He came for us, not because we're strong, capable of working things out on our own. No, Jesus came because we're spiritually impoverished and weak, and in desperate need of a grace that only He can offer. If you think you're strong, if you think you've got everything covered, Jesus has nothing to offer you. But if you know you are weak- maybe a doubter like John, or broken like Job, or morally bankrupt like king David- Jesus offers you Himself. And He is sufficient for you. Make no mistake. His power is made perfect in weakness. That's the truth you need to hear in this moment. Don't ever forget it.