

SPEAKER 1: Will you pray with me. Gracious God of epiphany and revelation, send sparks to our synapses. May we find something new today. May it warm our hearts. May it move our feet. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONGREGATION: Amen.

SPEAKER 1: I am so glad to be with you all again. It is like coming back home. It's really special to me. As Alana mentioned, I was here with you all in the fall and I'm now serving the church [INAUDIBLE] South Church in Boston. So greetings from across the river and thank you for having me this morning.

I do a lot of driving. I do. I have commuted-- I commute now. I have commuted for many years. And it's a good thing that now we have GPS because I used to get lost a lot. But now we have GPS so I've got it in my phone. I was driving around the other day with my son. We were trying to find this tiny little museum that had these trains. And it was somewhere, I'm sure it was somewhere. And every time I would drive past it and I would miss it. And my phone would tell me, rerouting, rerouting. If you have one of these GPS's, you know this. If you missed your turn it will tell you, it is now rerouting you to your proper destination.

I think that's a lot what this time of year is about. This season of epiphany. This time right after the new year. It's about reorienting ourselves. Rerouting ourselves a little bit. Directing ourselves back in the right direction, because there are so many things that can steer us off the course.

And I think that this is what John the Baptist was about too. He was all about trying to help people reorient themselves, reroute themselves. It's about where your life is pointing. This is a passage from the Surangama Sutra, which is a core teaching of zen Buddhist training. Which says, "Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to a bright moon in the sky. Words in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it's necessary to gaze beyond the finger itself."

This was what John was about. John the Baptist his life was lived intentionally so that everything about his life pointed towards something bigger. Something on the horizon. Something we could not quite yet see.

John lived simply. Most of the poor people in Jesus' day ate figs and fish and barley loaves but John was so poor -- how poor was he -- John was so poor that he ate locusts. Maybe covered in a little bit of honey so that he could choke them down. And John was so poor -- how poor was he -- that he didn't just wear a linen cloth, he wore a camel's hair coat. That was about as poor as you could get.

And the things that John wore, and the things that John ate, they pointed to something else. They said, I'm not sold out to the culture. I'm nobody's pawn. Nobody owns me. And because

no one owns me I can tell you the truth, straight up. When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.

And John got people's attention because he looked like the ancient prophet Elijah. Out there in the desert, near the Dead Sea wearing this rough, dark haired camel coat. And the entire Jewish community, the one that John and Jesus were both born into, they were taught, over and over again, that before the Messiah came, a prophet, like Elijah, would show up. Dressed like him, and talking like him. This was so that the people would know that God was up to something and they needed to get ready.

And John was so much like these prophets of old. A prophet was someone who boldly spoke for God. One who wasn't afraid to say what God was really thinking. Often issuing a warning of impending judgement and doom. When John showed up, there really hadn't been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. And here's John saying, repent of your sins. And turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is coming near.

And he had quite a following. But have you ever wondered why. Why did so many hike out to the Jordan River to hear him. It is a long haul from Jerusalem to the Jordan. It is 20 hot and dusty dry miles one way, and the road back is uphill the whole way. Back at the height of his television ministry, Robert Schuller's Hour of Power had an audience of what, millions? But I wonder how big it would have been, if they all had to trek 20 miles to hear him? Would his message have moved anyone to make that journey all the way to the Jordan River.

John the Baptist moved people because -- not because he preached a soft, I'm OK, you're OK, God loves you in any way, kind of sermon. John moved people because he preached not what they wanted to hear, but what they really needed to hear. And yes, it was blunt. It was hard edged. It hit them right between the eyes. He grew the vipers. God is cutting out the dead wood. The fire is ready.

There are those who say people don't go to church to hear the truth, they come to be comforted. Maybe some do. We all need a little comfort now then. But to say that's the only reason that people ever come to church is really an insult. Not to the preacher, but to the congregation. And I know that's not why you come to church week after week.

So what was it about the sermons that people found so compelling. Unfortunately, we don't have a complete transcript of even one of his sermons, but we know that John's message was new and different. The prophets of old had preached, you are sinful and you're in trouble. Repent now. But in reading those prophets of old, there always seems to be a bit of an undertone of, I know you're never going to change.

But John didn't just say, here's how it is. He used his message to point ahead. Here's how it's going to be. In our scripture passage we hear that all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the messiah. And John answered them saying, I baptise you with water. But the one who is coming is more powerful than I, and I not even worthy to

untie the bond of his sandals. He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and with fire. And he's coming.

John preached repent, for the Kingdom of God is coming. Repent because God is coming and immediately. And because God is coming, because Christ is coming, we will have helper. And things will never be the same again. John's followers didn't just come to see John, but because John helped them believe in something they could not quite yet see.

So part of what made John great was that he pointed beyond himself. He didn't let the crowds get to his ego. And he pointed beyond the sinfulness of the people around him, of the world around him. To becoming a savior, a deliverer. And in pointing a way forward, he gave people hope, and a reason to change.

Now I could take this sermon in a very repent-y direction. There are things that we need to repent for. It's clear. John is saying the world is not how it should be. Too many people are hungry. Too many people live in fear of violence. Too many people suffer under the oppression of a powerful regime that does not see them as human. Repent. Repent.

We can speak those words today. Repent of the ways we treat the environment. Repent of the ways we treat one another. Repent of the ways we don't take advantage of our full gifts and share ourselves with the world. Repent. But then, John is pointing to something more. And that something more comes in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

John Dominick Cross, the author of *The Historical Jesus*, writes these words. And if you know him you might imagine me speaking this in a slightly Irish accent. "The difference I see between John the Baptist and Jesus is, to use some fancy academic language, that John is an apocalyptic eschatologist. Apocalyptic eschatologist.

An eschatologist is someone who sees the problems of the world being so radical that it's going to take some kind of divine radical solution to solve it. John says that God is going to descend in some kind of catastrophic event to solve the world. There's another kind of eschatology though, and this I think is what Jesus was talking about.

I'm going to call it ethical-eschatology. That is the demand that God is making on us, not us on God. God on us. To do something about the evil in the world. In Apocalypse as it were, we are waiting for God. In an ethical-eschatology, God is waiting for us. That's I think what Jesus is talking about in the Kingdom of God.

It's demand for us to do something in conjunction with God. It is the Kingdom of God, but it is the Kingdom on earth of God. When Jesus came to be baptized, he came to be publicly identified as a pivotal figure in the movement reorienting towards the Kingdom of God.

Moreover, his baptism signaled that God was now taking steps to make this radical change happen here and now. Entering the waters of baptism is not about reorienting his life for Jesus. It was the moment when God broke through and said, I'm here, now, with you.

And you are my beloved. And I did this with you. Yes, everything needs to change. And yes, we need a new direction. And yes, I'm here with you to empower you to take those steps in that new direction. Baptism is not a one way street. It's not simply repenting and wanting to change. Repenting and wanting to change, and having God say, yes, I'm here in the water with you. And yes, we are building the kingdom together today."

It makes sense that Jesus started his ministry with baptism. It's hard to think of something more humble as a way to start. There's nothing more humiliating than having been dumped in a dirty river.

But through the waters of baptism, we are reminded of the primordial waters. The waters of chaos out of which creation has grown. We are reminded of the waters of liberation. The passing through of the Red Sea and God's promise to be with us and to break every chain.

Now I'm not having an altar call today. Anybody expecting an altar call where I'm inviting you to affirm -- have a baptism, or affirm your baptism in fact that's not what I'm going to do now. But I will say that whether you have been baptized or not, you may have had one of these moments. Perhaps you experienced a moment where you recognized your own blindness about something, your own shortcomings. And you said to God, God, I've been too proud. I thought too highly of myself. I come to you with true humility. Help me to put you first. Help me to reorient my life.

We all need a slice of humble pie from time to time. Or maybe you felt like your life got way off track, and you needed a new start. Have you had a come-to-Jesus moment, a turning point. A moment in which you took that first step in a new direction. Or maybe like you are reading from Isaiah today, you've experienced trial by fire. You've had to walk through a river of despair.

Whether you have been baptized or not, whether you're a church member or not, I hope you will remember these moments in your life. And remember the strength you've gained from them. Remember also these moments in your life when you've had to humbly put yourself in God's hands and take a new step on the Jesus path.

And if it's been a while since you've had an experience like this, well maybe now is your chance. Epiphany is a season to think about discipleship. What it means to follow Christ. So on this day, I ask that you take that step with me.

Let us examine our hearts and approach this journey with humility. Recognize that we are on the journey to draw closer to God and to each other and find out who we are and what it means to follow Christ.

You don't have to take a dunk in the Charles River. You just have to be ready to say yes, God. I want to draw closer. I want to build your kingdom here and now and today, I will take that next step. Amen.