

1. A New Community

Mark 1:1–18; Matthew 3:1–12

Daily Bible Meditations

Angie Osborn

Sunday

Malachi 3:1-5

This passage, in the last book of the Old Testament, points us right to the New Testament. A messenger will prepare the way and then the Lord will come. Interesting, that is just what happened!

I found an illustration of Jesus holding the Old Testament in his left hand. Christ was very clearly in the middle and the New Testament was in his right hand. Christ pulls the scriptures together, making them whole. He is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. He is the baby born of a virgin in the New Testament. He is the fulfillment of prophesy from days of old and our savior today!

Monday

Isaiah 40:1-5

This passage convicted me: do I work hard for the Lord? It is so easy in our society to work hard and end up virtually nowhere. Our focus should be on doing the work of the Lord and bringing glory to him in all that we do and say. Could something be approached with a more positive attitude; could day-to-day tasks that seem mundane to me be done for his glory?

My sin **is** paid for and the Lord **does** give blessings that more than double my multiple sins. At the end of my earthly life, when I meet Christ face to face, there truly will be comfort as he says: Comfort, comfort, your hard service has been completed and your sins are paid for (vs. 1 and 2, paraphrased)!

Tuesday

Isaiah 40:6-11

A voice crying out... I picture John the Baptist, standing on the top of the mountain, yelling to the valley below, "Here is your God!" Somehow, I have a very hard time imagining myself standing in that place! Thankfully, God has given us each different gifts. Although I do believe that each of us should do our part as a voice-crying-out, I think that we can go about it in different ways.

So what could we do, other than stand on the mountain with a bullhorn? What can you do where you are? How can you tell others about the Lord in your workplace? Can you be an example in your actions and words? Can you be a "voice crying out" in your own home? The Lord gives us opportunities each day to be witnesses of his love and to give him glory. Pray that he will show you how to do that today.

Wednesday**Matthew 3:4-10**

John the Baptist is described in a way that leads us to believe that he had few worldly possessions. He was dressed in animal skins and ate locust and wild honey. He had very little, which allowed him to move around easily. He was able to follow God's call and share the Good News with others. John was a missionary; he gave up worldly "stuff" and made himself wholly available to spread the Good News of Christ. As you pray today, ask the Lord to bless, strengthen, and encourage those on the mission field.

Thursday**Matthew 3:11-19**

As we share our faith, we should be ever mindful of why we are able to do that. We are able to point others to Christ because of his willingness to take on our sin. We are able to point others to Christ because of his willingness to die in our place. We are able to point others to Christ because of his victory over death. We have done nothing to deserve our salvation. We are not worthy to carry Christ's sandals, yet he gave his life for our salvation—that is what we can tell others!

Friday**1 Peter 2:1-10**

We are a chosen people, belonging to God! What an amazing claim that is to be able to make! With almost any title or identity, certain responsibilities come; that is true for Christians. The beginning of the passage talks about being built up into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. Later in verse 11, we see the responsibility that we are given. In order to build up the spiritual house and holy priesthood, we need to be striving to live pure and holy lives that will glorify God and help others turn to him. Embrace your identity in Christ and bring him glory!

Sabbath**Mark 1:1-8, Matthew 3:1-3**

I find it so amazing that things prophesied in the Old Testament are made real in the New Testament. It is difficult to grasp the concept of God being past, present and future, yet scripture continually shows us that he is just that! It was prophesied that a messenger would come before the Christ, preparing the way. That is what John the Baptist did, in just the way that it was prophesied he would.

We serve a faithful God. He makes promises—and he always keeps them. God is good, and we can trust him all the time!

Study	Background	Devotional
Mark 1:1–8; Matthew 3:1–3	Mark 1:1–8; Matthew 3:1–12	1 Peter 2:1–10

Key Verse

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2).

Heart of the Lesson

People look for a place where they can belong. What kind of community fosters a sense of belonging? The new community about which John talked to which Jesus called people was a community of love, acceptance, repentance, and forgiveness.

Questions for Studying the Text

1. Today's scriptures document the beginning of a new community announced by John the Baptist and pioneered by Jesus. What communities were people leaving in order to enter this new community? How did the leaders of their former communities feel about their departure?
2. As you entered the community of Christians, what communities did you leave behind? What contacts do you still have with these communities? How can you use these contacts in order to build God's kingdom?
3. Today's scriptures show the people coming into God's kingdom by repenting and being baptized. What did you do in order to enter God's kingdom? How is your story similar to that of the people in today's scriptures? How is your story different from theirs?
4. Each of us has a ministry of preparing people for the coming of the Lord in their lives. John carried out his ministry by inviting people to repent and be baptized. How are you carrying out your ministry of preparing people for Jesus?
5. Matthew 3:7-12 has a strong emphasis on judgment. If you are a member of God's kingdom, what judgment are you vulnerable to?

Understanding and Living

Steve Osborn

The Search for Community

In Genesis 2, God declared, “It is not good for man to be alone” (2:18). God then brought the animals before Adam, but among them “there was not found a suitable helper for him” (2:20).

The search for community has driven humanity from the beginning of time to seek out relationships with others and to attempt to form groups of heterogeneous men and women with whom they can live. While learning to live together with others has never been easy, we have proven through history that it is difficult to survive (much less thrive) outside the context of community.

God has designed the human heart with an inherent need to connect with others in meaningful ways. This served as part of his Grand Plan for the world—to draw his children into the new community (the Church) which his Son, Jesus Christ, would initiate through his life, death, and resurrection.

John Prepares the Way

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord...” In *Godspell*, a theatric interpretation of the message of the book of Matthew, the lonely haunting strains of these words paint a clear picture of the solitary life of John the Baptist: a single voice raised in the barrenness of the desert against the

backdrop of the strong heritage of the Jewish faith; a voice calling to barren people offering hope in the context of hopelessness, declaring the advent of a new and better way.

Both Matthew and Mark utilized this prophecy from Isaiah 40 to launch their descriptions of the ministry of John the Baptist. John’s ministry was truly one of preparation for that of his cousin, Jesus Christ. He paved the way for the new community of Christianity that would be ushered in.

This messenger sent by God himself (according to the prophecy—Mark 1:2) emerged, not surprisingly, at the perfect time in a historical and cultural context that was ripe for the harvest of his message. Following the exile of the Jews in 586 B.C. and their subsequent return, things never did really get back to normal for Israel. True, they were once again occupying the Promised Land that had played such a prominent role in their history and their relationship with God, but the land was not truly theirs, as they lived there under the rule of other kingdoms.

John arrived on the scene five hundred years later with Israel under Roman domination in an atmosphere of hopelessness for the Jews. People were desperate for a ray of hope, for a place to belong, for something to

believe in. The stage was set for the entrance of the Messiah—the promised deliverer of the Jewish people. Thus the “voice” was sent to alert God’s people to the initiation of his plan.

It would be interesting to know exactly how much John understood of the new Kingdom and community for which he was preparing the way. Did he fully understand what he was preparing people for? Probably not, as that full revelation would be daunting for any human mind to comprehend. However, John’s actions, words, and responses demonstrated that he did have a proper perspective of the role of Jesus and of his own role in this new movement.

In referring to Jesus, John spoke of one “more powerful than I” whose sandals he wasn’t worthy of tying (Mark 1:7). He also enlightened the people to the coming ministry and baptism of Jesus—both of which John freely admitted would be greater than his own. Matthew and Mark reported a widespread, positive response to John’s message and call to repentance. But John never let it go to his head. Rather than soaking up the limelight and demanding personal advantages, John, consistent with his role as a forerunner, constantly redirected the people to the one who would come after him. In fact, we can almost sense John’s relief when

Jesus finally came to him to be baptized and to launch his formal ministry.

The Message of Repentance

In our culture of media saturation where anyone with enough money and initiative can get their message out, we have grown accustomed to seeing people respond to the most attractive messages. The Apostle Paul predicted in 2 Timothy 4:3 that the time would come when people would “gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” We can observe this trend in the great proliferation of TV Evangelists preaching the health and wealth gospel and that God just wants us to feel good about ourselves. The size of their followings (and their bank accounts) would suggest that people are flocking to these “easy” messages.

In stark contrast, John’s message was a difficult one to swallow. John preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). He spoke of God’s promised forgiveness and of hope for those who would turn from their lives of sin. However, John’s message was anything but “easy believism” or “cheap grace.” The repentance he preached required a change in lifestyle, as evidenced by his conversation with the Pharisees. John called them names and

demanded that they, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8, NIV).

Repentance served as the portal through which entry could be gained into the new community which John was helping to establish. Even though John’s clothing, diet, and living habits were quirky and his message demanding, the people responded. They came flocking from all over the area to be baptized by John. This was what they had been looking for—something they could be challenged by and belong to at the same time.

Membership in the New Community

Repentance remains as the portal for entrance to Jesus’ new community which John helped to establish: a repentance that involves recognizing and acknowledging that the sin in our lives separates us from God; a repentance that requires a very real decision to change our lifestyle by turning our backs on that very same sin and choosing to live differently. That is all it takes to be part of God’s community. Granted, we must rely fully on his strength to actually overcome the sin, but what he is looking for from us is a decision.

People today are trained in the fine art of solitude. Needing someone else is often seen as a sign of weakness. But Jesus’ community provides belonging,

encouragement, support and accountability—things which all people really long for. The Church is in a prime position to help provide this community. As we reach out to a lost and broken world, we often are tempted to feel that we do not have much of anything attractive to offer which would compete with the world’s offerings. On the contrary, it seems we have exactly what they are looking for—if only we are willing to unveil God’s love and his perfect plan.

Hints for Teaching

Lesson Goals

1. Explore the beginnings of a new community that was announced by John and pioneered by Jesus.
2. Enable the participants to recognize that the community of faith is a place where they belong or fit in.
3. Encourage the participants to identify ways they can be involved in this community and commit themselves to take action.

Looking Forward

The community of God’s people has a humble beginning.