

The Joy of Christ
John 3:22-36

So, what was John getting out of this whole preaching business? Not great material wealth, that's for sure. Matthew's gospel tells us that he wore a garment of camel's hair, tied around him with a leather belt - that's not exactly the most expensive, or even comfortable, kind of clothing. He didn't have great food to eat, either - Matthew tells us that he ate locusts, grasshoppers, and the honey he could steal from the wild bees.

But no matter how few worldly goods John had, he was nevertheless faithful to proclaim God's word. He was the sort of preacher who called it like he saw it, and that, of course, meant that he made as many enemies as he made friends.

For the essence of John's message was one that few of us like to hear. John didn't preach a health-and-wealth, name-it-and-claim-it gospel. No, John preached a message of repentance, of the need for the people of God to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord by confessing their sins.

That kind of message certainly wasn't popular with the religious leaders of the day. In fact, Matthew tells us that John called them a "brood of vipers." Nevertheless, there were many people who did respond to such an honest and challenging message. Matthew tells us that all Judea, all the region around the Jordan went to John to be baptized.

In all the important measurements of ministry, therefore, John was successful. He was faithful to the Word, and as a result, many people came to repentance. Like most preachers, he had no worldly success, but was doubtless satisfied with a ministry fruitful in spiritual things.

But what was John to do once Jesus came on the scene? After that point, the people began to follow Jesus, not John. People sought baptism from Jesus' disciples, not from John. All John had in the world had been the people who had been listening to him, and now those people were listening to Jesus.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Verse 24 tells us almost in passing of how John's brief ministry would end - in prison. The other three gospels explain this in much greater detail, showing how John's straightforward preaching would eventually get him into so much trouble.

Herod Antipas, you see, was the son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great had two other sons by another wife - Aristobulus and Herod Philip. Aristobulus had a daughter named Herodias. Herod Philip took a liking to his niece, Herodias, and married her. But that wasn't the worst of it. Herodias then left her uncle Herod Philip to become the wife of Herod Antipas, who was also her uncle.

That's sick stuff, even according to our rather loose modern moral standards. And so John simply had to say something about it. His mission was to call the people to repentance, and if anyone needed to repent, it was Herod Antipas, who was sleeping with his own niece, who had also been his brother's wife. How could John remain silent in the face of such wickedness?

And so John spoke up, and so Herod Antipas threw him in prison. That's the terrible story to which verse 24 so briefly alludes. Moreover, Herod Antipas would eventually go so far as to have John murdered, just because he dared to speak the truth.

No, John didn't know the terrible way his life would end at the time the events of this passage took place. But he did see his ministry, his life's work coming to an end. He saw all the people to whom he had been preaching leaving him in order to follow Jesus. So, what was John getting out of this deal? What did John get for being faithful to the Word of God?

It's easy even for us modern preachers, with our comfortable salaries and retirement plans, to wonder about this sometimes. No, we don't have to worry about being thrown in jail for preaching the truth, at least not in America. And even though most preachers make less than our similarly educated peers, my guess is that few of us go into preaching for the money. My guess is that most of us are like John, mainly interested in seeing lots of people coming into the kingdom of God.

But not a lot of that is happening either. You know, the average Presbyterian church has only 115 members, and that number is dropping. As of right now, our stated clerk's best guess is that our presbytery lost over 300 members last year. And aside from the growth in Korean congregations all over the country, only Middle Tennessee presbytery reported growth in 2008. All that means that there are a lot of faithful ministers these days who aren't seeing much growth in their congregations.

But these days, even the most prominent preachers from the biggest churches have to wonder if their ministries are doing any good. Along with people from all over the country, I have heard many wonderful messages over the radio from Bible-believing pastors like David Jeremiah and Michael Youssef. I have read with profit that best-selling book, "The Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren. But no matter how many millions listen to them and read their books, are any of the problems in our society improving?

Think about it. Billy Graham is the greatest preacher of our time, beginning his ministry in 1943. He wrote all those books and preached to all those huge crowds and gave testimony before all those presidents – but how has America changed since 1943? In spite of all that faithful preaching, we cannot deny that America has fallen headlong into a morass of pluralism

and relativism, into a toxic sewer of social sin. Even though the evangelical church is stronger in America than in any other developed nation in the world, still we have corruption in government, still we have injustice even in the highest of places. No, in modern America, every honest preacher has to ask himself at times, what good is all this preaching and teaching really doing?

And so, as John saw his crowds of listeners melting away, it would have been easy for him to feel sorry for himself, wouldn't it? It would have been easy for John to give in either to envy or to frustration. But he didn't do that - he couldn't do it. No, the whole focus of John's life was different. And it was that focus that allowed him to be faithful to his calling, even in the face of disappointments, even in the face of death itself. For John's focus was exclusively on Christ and on His glory.

Why did John focus His life so exclusively on Christ? In the first place because John knew that Christ was the only reason for any of his successes. In verse 27, John tells us that we only have things because they have been given us from heaven. Verse 35 tells us that God the Father loves God the Son so much that all things, all honor, all power, all riches, all glory, have been given into the hands of Jesus. Sure, many of us work very hard at our careers. But in reality, there aren't any self-made men. There are simply people whose efforts God has chosen to bless with success. Whatever success we may enjoy is only due to the grace and the blessing of God.

That is especially true of the ministry of the Word. Verse 34 tells us that it is God alone Who gives the gift of His Spirit. And without the Spirit of God moving in the hearts of sinners, they will never be convicted of sin, they will never repent, and they will never turn to Christ. Indeed, without the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for anyone either to preach the Word or to be transformed by hearing the Word. In one way or another, all our successes are due to God's grace alone.

John knew all that. He knew that whatever success he had in ministry was only because of God's grace. And so he saw all his people leaving him to follow Christ, and he was content.

Why did John focus his life so exclusively on Christ? In the second place because he knew that all truth comes from Christ. As a preacher, John was, after all, in the truth business. John used the truth of the Word of God to call people to repentance, and John spoke the truth when he pointed to Jesus, the One Who would come after him.

Now, that is not to say that preaching the truth is always popular. Telling the truth about Herod's sin got John put into prison and eventually murdered. In the same way, verse 32 reminds us that no one really wants to receive the witness of Jesus Christ. No one really wants

to hear that he is a sinner in desperate need of a savior. No one really wants to hear that so many of his thoughts and actions and even feelings and intentions make him worthy only to experience the fires of hell. No, it's no wonder that so many people still refuse to receive the witness of Christ, the truth that John so faithfully proclaimed.

But in verse 31, John reminds us that all this Biblical truth, however unpleasant, comes not from the earth, but from heaven. John's message wasn't something that he dreamed up, like a novel or a screenplay. No, John was preaching the Word that came from an authority greater than any other.

In fact, John makes it quite clear that Jesus Christ, the One to whom John bore witness, the One Whom God Himself sent, was not just speaking the truth. Jesus was speaking the very words of God Himself. So of course John was content to point people to Jesus, in the same way that all responsible preachers do today. After all, no one should go to church to hear what the preacher says. You should go to hear what God says.

And the good news is that which verse 33 tells us: God is true. The good news is that no matter how many conflicting truth claims clamor for our attention today, no matter how many sincerely held opinions claim validity, we know that there is only One eternal, unchangeable measure of truth – God Himself. Just as anything according to God's will is right, anything that accurately reflects God's Word and God's world is true.

John knew all that. He knew that any truth he had ever preached had come from Christ. And so he saw all his listeners following Christ, and he was content.

Why did John focus his life so exclusively on Christ? In the third place because he knew that true joy in life comes from glorifying Christ. That was, after all, the essence of John's ministry. Even before he was born, he leaped with joy within his mother's womb in the presence of Jesus, who had also not yet been born. John spent his whole life bearing witness to the One Who would come after him, but Who would nevertheless be much greater than him.

And because Jesus is the source of all power and because Jesus is the source of all truth, John found great satisfaction, great fulfillment, great joy in bearing witness to Jesus. John found great joy in celebrating Jesus, in the same way that we rejoice when we go to our friends' weddings. No, on such occasions we aren't the ones getting married, but that doesn't matter. We see the joy on our friends' faces, and we share in the happiness of the bridal couple. We are happy because they are happy. Because of our love for them, we rejoice because they rejoice.

And that's the greatest joy for John, and really for any faithful preacher. John's greatest joy is not that he would be successful, but that Jesus would be successful. John's greatest joy is

not that people would listen to him, but that they would listen to Jesus. For John's greatest joy is for the joy of Christ to increase as more and more people come into His Kingdom, sharing in His everlasting life. That's why John could say, even when his own earthly ministry was at an end, that his joy had been made full – because his life was so focused on Christ, Christ's joy became his joy. May that be our joy as well.