

The Quiet Hour

For Dominion Presbyterian.

The Preaching of John the Baptist.*

REV. W. G. JORDAN, D. D.

The subject of our meditation is the preaching of John the Baptist; John came in the spirit and power of Elijah and his preaching is of the stern, strong kind, a kind which, no doubt, has a part to play in our own soft and easy times. We are apt to think now-a-days that the preacher must only speak of the love of God, and that in the gentlest tones. Repentance and righteousness are, however, still themes of prime importance, and without them we cannot really understand the gospel of love.

The opening words of the lesson furnish us with a striking specimen of Luke's learning and thoroughness in the handling of historical questions. This led Ewald to speak of him as "the first writer who frames the gospel history into the great history of the world." He fixes the date by a sixfold chronological cord and thus does indeed place the record of John's career in the framework of the world's life of that time. We cannot now enter into minute details of chronology and geography. They are important in their way, but those anxious to study them can find elaborate discussions in commentaries and dictionaries and we must not allow chronology and geography, which have been well named, the "two eyes of history," to divert us from our proper purpose.

Note then that we have varied powers set before us in this brief introduction. There is the political power of emperors and local rulers; there is the ecclesiastical power represented by the high priests of the Jewish Church. These all men acknowledged to be forces great and terrible of which men should stand in awe. But here we have a different power, the power of the Spoken Word. The word of truth and righteousness spoken by a lonely young man, was also a great force. It could make the king tremble, and although it did not save the speaker from a tragic fate, it entitled him to rank among the heroes of God's eternal spiritual kingdom. Kings relied on the force of the sword, and priests trusted in their splendid ritual and dogmatic law, but the new preacher appealed to the living conscience. John was a "herald." A herald implies a king, and the king is no less real because he was unseen. The unseen is the spiritual and eternal. This word herald gives us an important aspect of preaching; it views it not as arguing or teaching, but as declaring the presence and power of the deepest life of man; he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. This can never be out of date; whenever we awake to the realities of life we realize our unworthiness and our need of repentance. We

need not some small outward penance, but a radical change of mind, a new view of self and of God, which shall prepare the way for forgiveness, for that remission which destroys both the guilt and the power of sin, so that we may learn to say "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

The man who can utter aright this truly great message is in the prophetic succession. He may sink his own personality and speak of himself as a voice crying in the wilderness, but it is still true that he comes before the King and prepares the way of the Lord. Such a preacher is not a time-server or flatterer; he uses strong words that he may rouse the conscience of men who are hardened in bigotry and proud of their perfection. His first declaration is that men must not trust in worldly privileges; though they are children of Abraham, they must bring forth works meet for repentance. The judgments of the kingdom are not based on rank or wealth, but on character. Men proud of their national privileges and ecclesiastical position are met by the claim for a penitent spirit and a pure life. John may not, according to our ideas, have preached a full and perfect gospel, but his gospel, such as it was, came with startling effect to his hearers. It demanded that they should cast away their idols and turn to the living God of righteousness. It was definite and detailed. The preacher did not spend his strength in fine sentiments or vague generalities. When men asked "What shall we do?" he gave them something to do that was clean and unselfish. He did not claim that the doing of these things would make them perfect, but they would, at least, test their sincerity, and prepare the way for something nobler. Their homely, honest duties were far nobler than great display of ritual and minute observance of mere human traditions. John himself stood apart from society because of its corruptions and he called on men to be sober, just and kind. The highest salvation cannot come in that way. The true Savior must enter into the soul and into society, that He may cleanse and uplift it. But John is a splendid specimen of plain living and high thinking, and shows forth nobly in his own person, that it is not clothes or the luxuries of the external life that make the man, but lofty faith and strong character. He himself declares at the close of the lesson that his ministry and message are not perfect. If they were perfect, there would be no need to look for anything more. But this is a water baptism, which must be followed by the baptism of fire; it is the call to repentance which prepares the way for the Son of Man. The Saviour Himself will come nearer, that He may enable us to realize the righteousness of which John spoke, but He will at the same time, vindicate the wisdom of His servant.

A Prayer.

Almighty and most merciful God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being; Lord of life, source of all light, guiding and governing all things of Thy loving kindness and power, hear our thanksgivings unto Thee for all the joy that Thou puttest into mortal life; but chiefly for the joy that comes of sins forgiven, weakness strengthened, victory promised, life eternal looked for. To every one of us grant that, being fully conscious of having erred and strayed from Thy ways, we may be equally conscious of our need to go back again to the Good Shepherd. Let there be no doubt with any one of us that Thou dost forgive, even to the uttermost, all those who draw nigh in penitence to Thee; that so those of us who are sinful, and sad because sinful, and sorrowful in sinning, may have this day the joy of the Lord. Amen.—Christian Endeavor World.

"Joy Cometh in the Morning."

We always represent sorrow and trouble as circumstances of a night time of the soul. We speak of the life into which they come as being darkened over. Poetry calls tears the dew of that night. But "joy cometh in the morning." How true is that beautiful assurance of the old Hebrew psalmist! How eternally true! You may have gazed longingly into every dark hour of the passing night for a ray of comfort and deliverance, and in vain, but the morning brought light to your soul; you may have lain down in the evening in despondency, but you rise up in the morning with hope in your heart; at dusk the world seemed a tangle and a labyrinth, at dawn its path was open wide and plain before you. Pessimism is the philosophy of night, optimism the philosophy of the morning.

"Joy cometh" with "the morning." The coming of joy is certain and sure, therefore, as the morning's advent. And the morning will come. Never once has a day-dawn failed since God first set His light in the expanse of the heavens.

But why the night, why the weeping, why the sorrow? The physical night has its uses. Our planet could not stand unceasing sunlight on all its service. Night is as necessary as day to its life and economy. Neither could man endure perpetual happiness. We cannot understand why not, perhaps, but it is so. We know, at any rate, that there is beauty in contrast in life as well as in color; that if one note were always sounded in our lives there would be no music there; that doubtless we would never see and know, at least never thoroughly realize, the glad, bright joy of the morning, if there were no night in our lives. Faith has learned little until it has learned that

"Life is sweeter, love is dearer,
For the trial and the delay."

Another night will come to us, to all men. What about that night of death, so dread and dark? For it does the assurance hold good, that it will have a morning of brightness and joy. "In His favor is life." And life is light, and light is morning. O, be very sure that you live in the favor of God, through Christ His Son, and then faith will tell your soul that this night of death, likewise, is only a night, that it has indeed a morning of eternal joy!—The Examiner.

*S. S. Lesson for Jan. 21st:—Luke 3: 1-17.
Golden Text—"Luke 3:4.