

2020 has certainly been an interesting year to say the least. A season of challenges and insights, difficulties and new opportunities, changes and growth. But, when you stop to think of it that could also describe other seasons where there was no pandemic. I find that what I read and hear connects and highlights my current situation. The result being that in the months of March and April I saw that everyone in the Bible had a desert, isolated, quarantined, exiled moment in their lives. In May I see everyone who was going through difficulties and challenges in scripture. In June I couldn't find a passage that didn't just slap me in the head with the importance of being kind and considerate and watching my words. You get my point – if it's what you're going through then you see it everywhere. Not just with scripture – with anything – I've never heard of this product, diagnosis, situation and now suddenly it's everywhere. Because we find what we're looking for so to speak. So today's passage and sermon honestly have nothing to do with a pandemic or politics or issues of the day, but my guess is without me ever saying pandemic again this morning it's how most of us will apply it. And that's great and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But, there are others who need to hear this message because 2020 has been dark for reasons completely unrelated to the global crises. So I've titled this message Seeing and Hearing in the Dark and I pray there's some lessons we can learn from the life of John the Baptist today.

We're going to land in Matthew 11 if you want to get ready, but first we need to tell his backstory and most of you know I love to tell a good story from the Bible. John the Baptist got his name because his ministry was primarily calling people to repentance and baptizing them in water. There are a lot of men named John in the New Testament so I'm thankful for this distinction but it's not his last name but more like his job title so we'll just refer to him as John today. John happens to be a cousin to Jesus and his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were devout followers of God. They were quite old to be parents, but God loves to accomplish His plans in unexpected ways. So, not for the first time God opened the womb of a barren woman at just the right time for His plans to be set in motion, but at a time that no longer made sense to the mother and father. An angel came to Zechariah, who served as a priest in the temple, and announced God has heard your prayers! What prayers? The

one for a baby! Did that prayer get lost? We haven't prayed that in years. So stunned was Zechariah that he doubted the truth of the angel, which left him unable to speak for 9 months. Our words have power and rather than let doubt ring out over what was to be a miracle Zechariah was silenced. He goes home and Elizabeth gets pregnant and then receives an unexpected visit from her cousin, a young girl named Mary, who had also just learned that she would be having a baby. When Mary, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and carrying Jesus arrives, Elizabeth feels John in her womb began to move and kick and the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth too. These cousins were gonna be quite the pair.

When he was born he was named John, which was the name the angel had instructed his father to give him. As he grew to be a man he did weird things, which were also part of the whole you're going to have a baby and he's going to be a bit different and eat strange stuff – speech of the angel. Sure enough John lives in the desert, he wears clothes made from camel's hair with leather belts – a trendsetter he was not. He ate locusts and wild honey – maybe the honey was to help the taste of the bugs? It's sorta like deep frying vegetables to make them taste better. I mean why would anyone eat okra that hasn't been fried? So why would you eat locusts that haven't been marinated in honey?

In addition to eating weird things John also gets all the best speaking lines in his role as the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. He's super confrontational and doesn't care what others think. This is seen in the way he speaks truth to power. There are 2 types of people – the ones who have the perfect response or comeback in the moment and the ones who think of the perfect thing to have said 3 days after the conversation finished. And John was the first type. He had all the good lines – You brood of vipers! he called the crowd. Plus he called out Herod the imposter king because he married his brother's wife. That will end up being his downfall and the end of his head being attached to his body. But, that's another story for another time.

He also gets some of the highest honors. He dedicates his life to calling people to repentance and testifying of Jesus. In fact in John 3 he acknowledges to his own close followers that everything he's had in life has come from heaven and his greatest joy

has been in announcing Jesus. It's in that moment that he says his most famous line – Jesus must become greater, I must become less. It was John who announced to the crowd, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" And, it was John who had the privilege to baptize Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River. He was in the water with Jesus when they heard a loud voice from heaven proclaim, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," and watched as a dove descended and came to rest on Jesus. John had the best lines, the best moments, experienced the highest highs of calling and purpose. He had known from his earliest days that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, the deliverer of Israel, the One they were waiting on. He knew Jesus was the One who would save the people from their sins and He knew He was God in the flesh. John testified of this all of his life. And, then. And, then. Isn't that just the way? We've come to know Jesus, everything is going great, what a difference He's making in our lives, things have never been better, and then...

All four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – are sure to let us know that John is put in prison by Herod just as Jesus begins to call His own disciples. The forerunner of Christ had done his job in announcing the arrival of the Promised One and his reward for having done everything he was called by God to do was imprisonment. The scripture never says anything about life being fair. Prison is where we find John in Matthew 11.

**"After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Matthew 11:1-6**

John has been imprisoned for most likely around a year at this point; he's had plenty of time to mull over what all has happened and how he got to this place. My guess is he did not see this coming. His disciples were still bringing him word from the

outside world including what all Jesus was doing – namely teaching and preaching and performing signs and wonders. John hears this, but something doesn't quite make sense because things in the dark have a way of confusing us. You know this to be true because the sound of the air conditioner kicking on or the refrigerator running in your house are background noises in the day, but at night in the dark they are exponentially louder and cause you to say out loud – what was that? What we hear in the dark sometimes doesn't make as much sense as what we hear in the light.

It prompts John to send his disciples directly to Jesus to find out some things. This is always good advice. When life doesn't make sense – go directly to Jesus. I can't figure out what to do – go directly to Jesus and ask. Should I homeschool or send the kids to the classroom – go directly to Jesus because He knows best for each of you and your families. You can poll twelve of your closest friends on what they're going to do but none of them are parenting the children Jesus placed in your care so go directly to Jesus when you don't understand what you're hearing in the dark. John is feeling confused and sends his disciples directly to Jesus with this question – go ask Jesus – are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? Jesus was not living up to the expectations John had for him. Have you ever felt that way? John's thinking – come on, Jesus, this is not what I told everyone you'd be doing! John had testified that Jesus was the light of the world and now he's sitting in a dark prison. He declared that Jesus was the savior and now he's waiting to be saved. John had announced that Jesus was the Messiah – come to set them free – and he's captive in a prison. This is not what he had expected. Sometimes I can identify with John – can you? When we've testified and sang that You're our healer, Jesus, and then we wonder so what happened while sitting at the funeral? When we've announced to everyone that You're the prince of peace and now we've never been more anxious. Or when we said we'd trust You but You aren't living up to Your word or to our expectations. Sometimes in the dark what we've heard about Jesus doing doesn't match what we see. Alicia Britt Chole, said it like this, **“Somehow Jesus' actions were not matching John's expectations. And that distance between what John thought Jesus would do and what Jesus actually did was straining**

**John's certainty of who Jesus was...He experienced from prison what the first disciples later would experience throughout Jesus' Passion, and what we still ponder two millennia later. Jesus' ways are often unexpected." – Alicia Britt Chole**

Most of us can appreciate John's confusion because if we're honest we've been disappointed by Jesus when He failed to live up to our expectations.

When John's disciples make their way to Jesus and ask their question, Are you the one or should we expected another? Jesus says well, what have you heard and seen? Not what did you expect, but what have you witnessed and what have you known.

Jesus's actions may have failed expectations, but they were exactly in line with who the Scripture said He was and what the Messiah's work would be. Jesus then makes His case for what He has been doing and for who He is by quoting from Old

Testament passages that everyone in His day knew to be about the coming Messiah.

Isaiah the prophet had told them what to expect when the Messiah came – **"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert."** Isaiah 35:5-6 and in

chapter 61 Isaiah had said, **"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's**

**favor."** Isaiah 61:1-2 But, John knew those passages were coupled with judgment because that passage goes on, **"and the day of vengeance of our God, to**

**comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."** Isaiah 61:2-3 and

chapter 35 first says, **"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."** Isaiah 35:4

John was looking for vengeance and a take over from the tyrant king, Herod, by the new King Jesus. He was hoping for freedom for the captives and release from

darkness for the prisoners right away! Come take control and free me from prison.

John was expecting the Messiah to look like this and instead what he hears is

something that only fits half the promise. It was just a glimpse of what God's kingdom would be. Jesus told John's disciples go back and tell what you've heard me say and seen me do – **“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” Matthew 11:5**

Jesus tells them – tell John what you've seen and heard and then tell him – blessed is the one who doesn't stop believing in me when I don't meet their expectations. Regardless of where you sit today, John, in that prison, I'm still who you said that I am. You announced on the Jordan River that I was the Lamb of God who would save the world and now the Lamb is announcing to you in the jail that I've come to save you from your sins. What have you heard about me in the past – God's word had stated that the Messiah would come to give sight to the blind –and Jesus did. The prophets said the lame would walk – and when Jesus came they did. The Bible said that when Jesus came good news would be preached – and it was. As a side note I love that in a list of what we would consider major miracles and incredible moments – blinded eyes opened, people getting up and walking for the first time, the dead being raised! Jesus includes as just as amazing the fact that the good news is being preached to the poor. He's preaching to the poor and caring for the least of these – mind blown – He must be the Messiah. I mean who else can raise the dead and care for people who can't do anything for him in return. They were seeing Jesus fulfill the scripture! This means that if Jesus was fulfilling this part of the scripture then John had it on good authority that the rest would be fulfilled too. Don't fall away because you don't see it – yet. Jesus is letting John know – I am the One who was to come, and the One who is here, and the One who will come again. I am the One you have heard about from days of old and I'm the one you're seeing at work today. It may not look like what you expected, but then John the Baptist had always understood that God comes and works in unexpected ways – a baby born to a couple past child bearing years, a man dressed in camel hair and eating locusts in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord, a Savior in the form of a carpenter from Nazareth. It may not have been what I was expecting but I see Jesus at work and I hear of His goodness even in the dark.

2020 may not be what you were expecting for any number of reasons. I wasn't expecting to lose my job, or my spouse, I wasn't expecting to have to make the decisions I'm making, I never thought I'd be in this position, I never thought it would look like this. But, let me be clear 2020 may not have lived up to your expectations, this season of your life may have failed to live up to what you were expecting, but Jesus has not changed. Jesus has not failed you. He is still who He said He was. What you've heard about Jesus from the Bible is still true. What John and his disciples had heard and what they saw were not exactly the same, but they saw enough to trust that everything they had heard was true. I heard that when you came the blind would see and the prisoners would be free and those who mourn would be comforted, but all I've seen is blinded eyes be opened. Then take it on good authority that what you've seen is just a deposit guaranteeing that the rest of what you've heard will one day be seen as well.

Well, He hasn't met my expectations. Well, what were you expecting? Because you may have been expecting something that didn't line up with the word of God. Or maybe you were expecting heaven while you were still living on earth. What we see now is only a glimpse of what will be. What I've seen is Jesus breaking into the darkness with light but what I've heard is that we'll live in a heavenly city where there is no more night because Jesus is the light. What I've seen is momentary, but what I've heard is the rest of the passage that Jesus alluded to in Isaiah 35, **"They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."** **Isaiah 35:9-10** 2020 isn't all there is and what I've seen this year has weighed heavy in my heart, but what have I heard? I've heard of a day when it will be all joy all the time and there will be no more sorrow!

2020 has been a bit dark, but if you'll remember earlier I said that what we hear in the dark is exponentially louder than what we hear in the light. Maybe what God wants to say to us could only be heard in this dark season. Because the truth for John was that the God whose voice had thundered from heaven over the Jordan was the same God who whispered hope in the jail cell. What have you heard in the dark

from God's word? Maybe you haven't seen all that God has spoken to your heart, yet, but keep listening. Keep trusting.

Here's what I want to say as we finish – If God's word isn't true on the worst day or the darkest day of my life then it doesn't pass the truth test. In the dark or in the middle of the day God's word is true, and we can trust what we've heard from God's word. Situations change, the world as we knew it might have changed, but God's word never fails. God's word is what sustains us in the midst of the crazy and after the crazy has passed. Jesus said go back and remind John of who I am from the scriptures and let the scripture sustain him in the dark of the prison. The scripture was still speaking truth to John even in the dark reminding him that Jesus was who He said He was – He was the Messiah. Jesus can be trusted and God's word can be trusted – day or night, year after year. Whether it's on the banks of the Jordan River or in the belly of the jail. When you're full of joy or full of doubt. When you're testifying to the light of the world and when you're plunged into darkness. In every situation, on every kind of day what God's word says about Jesus remains true. Because what we see around us doesn't change what we hear from God's word. And, oh, how important God's word is!

**The Word of God keeps us from sin. (Psalm 119:11)**

**The Word of God preserves our life (Psalm 119:25)**

**The Word of God strengthens us when we are sorrowful (Psalm 119:28)**

**The Word of God comforts us (Psalm 119:52)**

**The Word of God is trustworthy (Psalm 119:86)**

**The Word of God is eternal (Psalm 119:89)**

**The Word of God is sweet (Psalm 119:103)**

**The Word of God is a light to our path in the dark (Psalm 119:105)**

**The Word of God gives us hope (Psalm 119:114)**

**The Word of God sustains us (Psalm 119:116)**

**The Word of God has been tested and tried (Psalm 119:140)**

**The Word of God gives reason to rejoice (Psalm 119:162)**

**The Word of God reveals Jesus (John 1:1)**



In a moment when we don't know who is telling the truth and we can't trust everything we're seeing I'm telling us all – we can trust what we've heard and seen about Jesus in the Word of God. God's word is true to us in the dark, in 2020, on the best days and the bad days.

**If you're in the dark:**

- 1. Go directly to Jesus**
- 2. Take Him your doubts and fears and worries**
- 3. Ask Him for what you need**
- 4. Go back to His word and remember what you've heard and seen about Jesus**
- 5. Remember that what you've heard will one day be made sight**

Let's pray.