

“Well, well, well. What have we here?” John had no sooner finished preaching and baptizing, resting, sipping water when one of his disciples pointed out a rather well-dressed crowd coming over the hill from town. “Decided it was time to listen to the prophets did you?” As one of these dapper visitors clears his throat John raised up his hand to stop him.

Like a mixture of a HS Principal, a Consumer Debt Counselor and a Therapist John spoke firmly but warmly: “Now, before you say anything, I’ve heard it all. You think you know all there is to know about serving God – you were born into the faith, you drink your morning coffee from a Bethelwoods mug, you always got the award at VBS for memorizing Bible verses, your pledge was always turned in on time, your offerings were always current, you attend worship faithfully, you took your turn as an elder or deacon – this is you isn’t it?”

John let the visitor stew in his own juices for a few moments, letting the new arrival feel guilty for what was just a brief moment but felt like an eternity to the one listening, and then John’s face creased in a wider smile as he said “It’s okay. God can just as quickly raise up a congregation of these stones as gather folks like you into the Kingdom!”

Now standing, John continued with real force, a force that came from deep within and from way beyond,

“My friend, God is looking for a little more than just a bunch of deadwood.

God wants some living trees that can bear good fruit.

God knows that you can recite the prophets’ words; but can you live them?

God knows that you can quote the Law; but can you obey it?

God knows that you welcome mercy but are you merciful?

God knows you have the sense to know right from wrong; but do you practice what you know?

All this is what God wants to know.”

Somewhat stunned the visitor and the group who had formed around him asked very openly “What kinds of things do we have to do?” “It’s simple, really,” says John. “You there, when you gather in your harvest, share it with those who have no food. You with the extra coat, give one away.

On a roll now, John sounding a bit like Homer Simpson continued, “Yo! tax collector!” (“GROAN” from the crowd) “It is okay that you do this for a living, but be fair about it, don’t abuse your power to benefit yourself – no pork! No earmarks! No special inducements!

Same goes for all of you in business – be just, be fair, No Madoff! No bailouts!

Same thing for you soldiers – I see you there out of your uniform, your muscular arms and y'all's haircuts give you away - don't go bullying and throwing your weight around, don't go torturing and water-boarding.

“God, our God loves the basics – for God has been talking about this stuff, all this stuff about justice and mercy and peace and fairness for ages. God has been talking about this stuff because this is who God is – a neighbor, a friend to the little guy and the outsider. God has been talking about it all along - Love, not animal sacrifice! Justice, kindness, mercy, peace; living God's simple truths - day to day. And that is why I offer you this water – a chance to be washed clean and to start over.

I John, I offer you this water; wade on in, for you it is a fresh start, a clean break, a complete overhaul, an extreme makeover. The water is the sign that you are in a new place, a different place, a changed attitude.

And it doesn't stop there because I John I can tell you that there is an even more wonderful new beginning yet to come, and just about to begin. There is One who is coming, coming to us all from God who offers new life in ways you cannot even begin to imagine.

This One, this One that is about to be here, will not only have water to offer but they will have and bring and offer the very Spirit of God to scrub you and change you and make like you like you have never been before.

This One, this One who is about to be here, will bring with them a fire that can rid us of all the useless, weedy, unworthy aspects of your lives. This same fire will also get you fired up to serve God in many new and wonderful ways. So are you in? Are you ready? Will you join in? Are you ready to get immersed in this Good News that God has for you and me and all of us? If so, “Come on down” and be baptized and make today - a new beginning!”

John can say, “Come on down” and be baptized and make a new beginning!” because Jesus is born to save! Jesus is the One, Born to save – not just the title of this sermon but these are the words to carry with you in your hearts and minds as we continue to wait to welcome the coming of our Savior! Jesus born to save so come, step into the water and make and take a new turn in your life.

Jesus born to save, so come and go to offer warm clothing and food and friendship and hope to those who have little or nothing.

Jesus born to save calls us to make and share fairness to and with and for those who previously were cheated or bullied.

Jesus born to save releases the Holy Spirit into our lives and into the life of the world in many, many new ways through acts of justice and compassion, through acts in which people refrain from injustice.

Jesus born to save opens wide God's realm – to all! “Step right up! Come on down! Get in the water! Move on to live changed lives! Jesus born to save!

And so it was and so it will be, on a cold night in an obscure cave, Jesus was humble, naked, helpless, vulnerable – the vulnerable God allowing us to get close – Jesus born to save.

We all know how difficult it is to receive anything from someone who has all the answers, who is completely cool, utterly unafraid, needing nothing, in control of every situation. Meeting such a person we feel unnecessary, unneeded, unwanted, of no value. God comes, a newborn baby, giving us a chance to love, to love God, to love all people.

Jesus born to save means that we have something to give to God – our hearts, our hands, our service, our devotion.

Jesus born to save is a scandal to any aspiring disciples looking for a triumphant Savior able to impose through force or coercion.

Jesus born to save shuts down every version of the prosperity gospel.

At times we have taken this message – Jesus born to save – and petrified and prettified the babe of Bethlehem. At times we have trivialized the divine scandal, sentimentalizing the smells of the stable by the whiff of the perfume counter. At times we still risk allowing an overwhelming nostalgia to rob the meaning of – Jesus born to save - of its shock value!

Both at the River with John and in the stable with the Christ-child ought we not tremble, as we adore the in-breaking of God Almighty. All the Santa Clauses, red-nosed reindeer, and fifty-foot trees put together create less pandemonium than Jesus born to save – who instead of remaining a statue in a crib, or a corpse in a tomb comes alive and comes to us and delivers us up to the fire and to the light – the Jesus who turns our lives around and changes the life of the world forever – Jesus born to save! Amen.