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The Gospel of Matthew 3:1–6

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, ² “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” ³ The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

*“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’ ”*

⁴ John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. ⁶ And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

The Gospel of John 3:22–28

Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people.

²³ At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. ²⁴ (This was before John was thrown into prison.) ²⁵ A debate broke out between John’s disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleansing. ²⁶ So John’s disciples came to him and said, “Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us.”

²⁷ John replied, “No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves know how plainly I told you, ‘I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.’”

The Gospel of John 1:6–9

⁶ God sent a man, John the Baptist, ⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a

witness to tell about the light. ⁹ The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Faith on the Silk Road.

The idea for this sermon struck me as Wendy and I were on board a small boat while going through the Panama Canal. The canal was a huge game changer: ships no longer had to take the long, treacherous route around the tip of South America to move goods and people between two halves of the world. The Panama Canal, which opened in 1914, greatly facilitated commerce, and to a minor extent, the trading of ideas and worldviews. But the travel route that had a dramatically greater impact was the so-called Silk Road, which was actually a system of many roads connecting Europe, the Middle East, India, and the rest of Asia. It was in operation from about 200 B.C. until about the 1400s, when travelers began using an ocean route instead of traveling over-land. Traveling by land was slow and dangerous, and caravans could carry only a limited amount of goods. Ocean travel, which involved going south-east through the Red Sea past Egypt and Arabia, then into the Indian Ocean and around India and China, was safer and allowed for much cheaper movement of large volumes of goods.

But during the approximately sixteen or seventeen hundred years in which it was dominant, the system of over-ground silk roads had a radical impact on

civilization. The Silk Road went from Italy to Greece, then eastward, above Arabia, then across Persia, India, and China. Spices, silk, fragrances, jewels, furs, ivory, horses, sugar, and ceramics made their way from the East to Eastern Europe and as far west as Rome, and European luxury goods, art, glass, silver, and gold made their way to the far East. Mathematics, science, philosophy, and religion moved across vast distances, intermixing European, Arab, Indian, and Chinese culture.

Our first two Bible quotes today talk about John the Baptist, who was baptizing people before Jesus began his ministry. In our first passage, Matthew's Gospel tells us that John was in the "*Judean wilderness*". In our second passage, John's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist was "*at Aenon, near Salim*". This is very important for two reasons. First, Jews believed that the restoration of God's kingdom would begin in the wilderness areas. They associated the desert, with its vast, rocky, inhospitable terrain with the coming of the Messiah. Second, the area where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing is north of Jerusalem, up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and north of the Dead Sea, in the northern part of what is now Israel. This put him in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, where north-south roads came down from the Silk Road, which then connected a huge chunk of the world with the land of the Israelites.

In other words, John the Baptist ushered in Christianity in an area where travelers from far away would have learned of his existence. The Gospel of John says that *“people kept coming to him for baptism”*. Indeed, there he was, in earshot of the emerging system of Silk Roads. Even before Jesus began to become known himself, John the Baptist was already introducing him to the world.

Christianity would eventually move north, out of Jerusalem, and then both east and west along the system of Silk Roads. If it weren't for what we call the Silk Road, there would have been very little movement of people and ideas between east and west. Christianity made its way north and west to what later became Constantinople, a major Christian center, then into Europe. But Christianity moved eastward, too. We tend to not think about it here in America, but Christianity spread into Persia (what is now more or less Iran), India, the land of the Mongols, and China. Many of these Christian communities are still in existence. Today there are perhaps a half million Christians in Iran, but at least a few hundred thousand. There are 28 million Christians in India today, and their faith community dates back to the first century A.D. In the 7th century, during the Tang dynasty, Christianity appeared in China. There are at least 30 million Christians in China today, and the real number could be 50 or 60 million.

There were some differences, of course, between various forms of Christianity, another thing that we tend to not think about in America. Eastern Christians, in particular, those who flourished long ago in what is now Syria, believe that Jesus Christ has two distinct natures, human and divine; they do not believe that Jesus' two natures are inseparable, which is what we believe. These folks were excommunicated because of their divergent beliefs and ended up creating their own church hierarchy.

Syria, by the way, should not be confused with Assyria. Assyria covered modern Syria and Iraq. Unlike Syria, Assyria is not a modern nation. It flourished before Arabs came to live there. In Central Asia, Assyrian Christians influenced a people called the Sogdians, who were commercial masters of the Silk Road. Their language became very dominant on the Silk Road, and they spread Christianity north to the Turks and East into China. For a while, Christian saints were referred to as "Buddhas" in China.

Why does this matter to us today? There is a new Silk Road today – and it is called the Internet. It connects the entire world. It's true that differing economics and politics lead to highly varying levels of accessibility and censorship on the Internet. But we do live in a new Silk Road age. The Silk Road was perhaps the first avenue for globalization, although it of course did not impact much of

Africa or any of the Americas. However, the Middle East is no longer the center of influence in the world. It is now the United States, western Europe, and China that dominate. And although these three cultural centers are far apart, they are tightly connected by the Internet. Agnosticism, the lack of belief in any God, in the post Christian United States and Europe, and the agnosticism in communist China, are now the modern faiths – to use a somewhat ironic term – that are spreading over the Internet.

There are two reasons why the Internet is killing Christianity. First, churches are no longer the social hubs of communities. More and more, people go online to find their connections. Second, the Internet has greatly accelerated the notion that people can find concrete, scientific answers to everything. When Americans are confused, when they don't understand what is happening or why it is happening, they Google it. We are also saturated in information, and many people have become preoccupied with data. They no longer appreciate mysteries and no longer want to connect with their mystical, spiritual sides, because these ideas don't mesh with the nuts-and-bolts, understand-it-all world of the Internet.

To a significant extent, Americans have become shallow. That's the point I want to make today. During the age of the Silk Road, which lasted for at least a millennium and a half, deep ideas, in particular, faith systems, moved across a

wide swath of the earth. It wasn't just Christianity that moved across the Silk Roads - so did Buddhism and Islam. It was an age where people were willing to debate vast, unanswerable mysteries. They were willing to take risks and believe in things that were not concrete and simplistic. Today, many in America have lost their willingness to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking inside them, guiding them toward the unknown. They email, send texts, watch videos: they use technology to distract them from that inner voice compelling them to believe.

So, this church here in Pierce, and the ones like it – and yes, there are still countless churches all over the world – are critical to the future of faith. The presence of these churches is why some of us are still willing to take the risk to believe. We still trust that voice inside of us because churches still exist.

This brings us to our third passage today. It's something that we've already looked at here, at a recent service. It's from the beginning of the Gospel of John, and it tells us, even before Jesus has a chance to speak to us in the Gospel, everything we need to know about our faith: *"⁶ God sent a man, John the Baptist, ⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. ⁹ The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."*

John the Baptist, the man who drew crowds from offshoots of the Silk Roads, came to tell us about a person who had knowledge that we cannot find on the Internet. It's deeper and far more challenging, and it demands a great risk on our part: we have to be willing to accept something that we can never fully understand while we are on this planet. Jesus Christ is the true light, and he can give light to everyone. I dearly hope that our culture, our nation, our world does not abandon faith. I hope that America recovers from the desperate need to deny the validity of anything that cannot be solidly answered with a Google search, that cannot be learned in a three-minute video, that isn't an obvious fact dictated by Wikipedia.

I usually weave a personal story into my sermon. Today I would simply like to end with one. I recently had a discussion with a student in my class at CU. I was helping her with her animation project. She was from China and had stayed after class. She saw my cross hanging from my neck – something that I wear deliberately so that everyone can see it, at least when I am not wearing a shirt and tie – and she pointed to it and said that she was a Buddhist. She said that she felt that she was like a Christian in the U.S., something that is no longer acceptable. She said that it wasn't just Christianity that the Chinese government was suppressing. The current leadership China, she told me, is suppressing

Buddhism. People are hiding Buddhist statues because the government is tearing them down and destroying them. People are hiding the fact that they practice this very ancient faith. They are supposed to love the party, not their religion.

It struck me that we were becoming like Communist China. We are suppressing faith. I told this student that many Americans, like the Chinese government, have a fear of organized religion. It is the one thing that has the power to supplant human authority. Faith gives us the true light. It is the light that refuses to conform to the dictates of society. Faith gives us the courage to stand alone, to not accept something simply because it is the easiest way to get ahead in the world. Faith is not pragmatic. It's not literal. It's not concrete. It cannot be understood with a Google search.

We need to reach deep into our past and maintain the strength and the courage of those who first spread the word across a system of roads that spanned much of the world. This young woman asked me to please not repeat what she had said to other Chinese students. I told her that of course I would not. I told her that we had different beliefs, but that we were both believers. As she walked out of the classroom, I felt like I had just traveled across the Silk Road and had a discussion with a believer from far, far away.