

“An Interview with an Author”
(A Dramatic Sermon)
Isaiah 40:1–11; Mark 1:1–8
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
December 10, 2023

Good morning! It is good to be with you! It is good to be with anyone, to be wanted, appreciated, in demand even! Ever since *The New York Times* included my book among the best Gospels written, I have been doing a lot of interviews. You might wonder, “How many Gospels are there?” Well, only four canonical ones, but there are many others, and my telling of the story has been recognized as one of the best!

I suspect it has something to do with the concise nature of my writing. Brevity is the soul of wit, as some decent writer who came after me said, putting these words on the lips of Polonius. Brevity is required today because there is so much wonderful music, and you’d rather hear more music and less words anyway...

But my writing is focused, unlike that fellow Paul’s; it is action-oriented, plot-driven, though loaded with rich thematic material, if I don’t say so myself... Everything happens *immediately* – I like that word – the story has purpose, and I want the reader to get to it.

But enough preamble, this is an interview, what are your questions? (pause) Ah, yes, I have received some criticism, especially here lately. Everyone is a critic these days... Some people don’t like my ending. I leave the disciples amazed at the empty tomb and don’t have them interact with the Risen Christ. I know you may think I do, but those last few verses were not written by me. They are the work of an editor. Do any of you have an editor? They are a blessing... and a curse... to any writer! I wanted to end with astonishment, not wrap up everything neatly with a bow. We’re talking about resurrection!

But the truth is I get more criticism of my beginning. You have just read it, at least eight verses of it. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” I say and then immediately get John the Baptist on the scene, the forerunner, like the one of whom the

prophet Isaiah speaks. I include no birth narrative like my fellow writers, Matthew and Luke, no shepherds or magi, no cuddly animals or majestic gifts, no pretty little baby you sing about today and throughout this season. Nor do I include poetic mystical language like John that goes all the way back to creation. “In the beginning was the Word...” No story that begins with creation is going to be brief!

I just mention Jesus, get John on the scene in all his grit and glory, and soon we will be off with the ministry of bringing God’s realm near. Some people don’t like that. It may seem jarring, or at least inadequate, to you. But I want people to get the point and stay with the point, not get lost in wonder and mystery, though they are part of the story.

What other questions do you have? (pause) Hmm... yes, I agree, I think a part of what surprises people is John – his message, his tone, his diet and attire, his very being. He’s not what many people expect not just at the beginning of a book about Jesus but about a potential fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

Before talking about a voice in the wilderness crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” Isaiah says, “‘Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says the Lord. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...’” John may be preparing the way for Jesus, but he doesn’t seem to be bringing comfort nor is he speaking tenderly. John brings a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. I have edited down his preaching here, but rather than speaking tenderly he calls people out, he confronts them with their sinful nature and need for change.

This is not comfort, as we tend to think of it, but the Hebrew word for comfort Isaiah used – *nahamu* – really refers to reversing one’s mind or feeling, experiencing a change desperately needed. For a nation afflicted by exile, the needed change is being set free and allowed to return home, and this is what God provides – comfort, we might say. For people set in their ways and resistant to God’s calling, what is needed is provocation, confrontation, change. This is what John offers and what Jesus makes possible.

If people think John is demanding, they better get ready. John says he is not worthy to tie Jesus’ shoes. He baptizes with water; Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit! Someone has said that Jesus came to

comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. That's not far off the truth. But I'd say the choice is not between comfort and affliction but between comfort and confrontation. Jesus' goal is never affliction, but he does know that sometimes to enable us to be whole, to be the people God's wants us to be, we need a word of challenge.

Isaiah's messenger in the wilderness understood this. Preparing the way of the Lord meant making straight in the desert a highway for God, lifting up valleys, bringing mountains low. That is not an image of laissez-faire theology; it is an image of radical change, somewhat like Jesus' mother foresees in his ministry, according to my colleague Luke.

One of your scholars has pointed out that there is a difference between being comforted in affliction and always wanting to feel comfortable (Melissa Bills, *The Christian Century*, December 2023, p. 25). She says that according to Isaiah, the latter led to Israel's exile in the first place. The people "mortgaged faithfulness for comfort – hoarding wealth, protecting privilege, and garnering favor through political and military conniving." That may sound familiar to you, all too familiar, the ancient Israelites are not the only ones to mortgage faithfulness, hoard wealth, protect privilege, and garner favor through conniving.

Sometimes we need comfort – in our grief, in our brokenness, when we are hungry or oppressed, when war breaks out and we are forced to flee. Sometimes we need confrontation – when we are self-absorbed and blind to the needs of others, when we are a part of the problem and not the solution, when we contribute to injustice and are deaf to the calls to righteousness and peace. Jesus brings what we need in the way of comfort or confrontation, and John sets the right tone for his ministry; strange as it seems, John sets the right tone.

OK, so maybe my answers aren't that concise, but the more I talk, the fewer questions you can ask... What else do you want to know? (pause) Yes, he was clothed with camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey, but there were no Jos. A. Bank stores in the wilderness nor were there any Ashley Christensen restaurants. There wasn't even a clothing ministry or Chick-fil-A! What do you think Jesus wore and ate?

Hmm... (pause) Yes, a lot of people came out to hear John, perhaps not *all* the people of Jerusalem, I may have taken a little literary license there or employed some ecclesiastical hyperbole, but there were a lot of people, and yes, they were baptized in what we called *living water*, the river, with living things in it. Baptism would become a sacred ritual among Jesus' followers, as you know, but in Jewish faith, though the term "baptism" was not used, a ritual bath or mikvah was practiced, sometimes as an act of ritual cleansing or as a rite of conversion.

What's that? (pause) Oh, no, I don't have any problem with the wonderful birth stories. I just wanted to begin and end in a different way, to provide a different lens thorough which to celebrate the good news of God's love for the world. It may seem jolting, less warm and fuzzy, but if you read these other accounts carefully, they are jolting, and not entirely warm and fuzzy, at least not for the characters in the story. You try having a baby in an animal shed without benefit of an epidural and a bunch of strange animal herders wandering in and wanting to see your newborn!

Don't miss the earthiness of this story or the message in all the wonder and mystery. God enters this world as one of us, in the form of a fragile child, read – he has a messy diaper and a runny nose, God does! In Christ, God comes to dwell among the poor and outcast, to heal the Jew and Gentile, to break down all barriers and extend love to all people. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together, all people!

Anyway, thanks for inviting me today. Enjoy your music. Enjoy this entire season. Read my book if you haven't done so already. Read it again, if you have, and read the other Gospels. They are well-written too. Maybe one of them will be recognized next year.

But let the story read you too. Great stories can do this, and this isn't just a great story, it is the best story, not just my telling of it, the story itself. God comes to redeem the world, the Holy One becomes a fragile child, everyone is embraced in love. That is a story worth telling and singing about over and over again!