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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Advent 2, Series C  
Saturday, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Title:** Who Was John the Baptist?  
**Texts:** Malachi 3:1-7b; Luke 3:1-14

**Focus:** John came to point people to Jesus.

**Function:** That they would turn away from their sins and turn to God for mercy and grace.

**Structure:** Story-Applied

**Locus:** “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...”



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. John the Baptist is one of the most important people who ever lived. Revered by numerous religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Bahai, he is also one of the most instantly recognizable characters from the stories of Scripture. John is usually depicted in art and in film as a bit of a wildman with an ungroomed mane and bushy beard. His clothes are crude, and his

diet Spartan. In Christian iconography, he often appears holding his own head on a platter. Sometimes he even has angel's wings. For John was the messenger foretold by the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me..." (Mal. 3:1, ESV).<sup>1</sup> (In Hebrew and in Greek, the word for *angel* and *messenger* is the same.)<sup>2</sup>

John is the last of the prophets before the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Yet with one foot in the Old Testament and the other in the New, he is hard to place. Although John performed no miracles, his words and wardrobe recall the prophet Elijah, as Christ himself declared (cf. Mal. 4:5; Matt. 11:13-14). Of John Jesus said, "Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11).

So who is this desert prophet clad in camel skin with locust legs stuck between his teeth? According to the Gospel writers (Evangelists), John was a voice: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Luke 3:4, ESV). But John's voice was not just spitting into the wind. His voice was a trumpet reverberating throughout all Israel.

By rights, John should have been a priest. His father Zechariah was a priest who ministered at the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, Zechariah was burning incense in the Temple when the angel Gabriel announced John's birth. The Jewish priesthood was hereditary, so people would have expected John to follow his father in the family business. But instead of walking the

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrew: *ykia;]m'*, *malachi*; Greek: *a[ggelo~*, *angelos*.

Temple colonnades and rubbing shoulders with the powerful people in Jewish society, John withdrew to the wilderness with the Judean hillside as his cathedral walls.

John the Baptist was not a myth or legendary figure. He's not a fictional character or a comic book hero. John the Baptist was a real flesh and blood person with a beating heart and lungs that drew in and expelled air (bug breath, apparently). Luke fixes John's ministry at an exact moment in world history:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Luke 3:1-2, ESV).

The intersection of all those reigns is about 29 A.D. (give or take a year). Even Josephus, the famous historian of *The Jewish War*, gives a nod to John, calling him “a good man.”<sup>3</sup>

John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). That was a strange—indeed, almost offensive—thing to do. The Jews, of course, had ritual washings before they ate and prayed. And Gentile converts to Judaism were usually baptized after they were circumcised.<sup>4</sup> But for a Jew to baptize other Jews was something new and unnatural. Why should the children of Israel, the people of promise, be baptized for their sins? Wasn't Abraham their father? So troubling was John's baptism that the Jewish religious ruling Council (Sanhedrin) even sent emissaries to find out why John was doing it (John 1:19-25).

John gave a devastating reply to their inquiry:

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<sup>3</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Josephus: The Essential Writings*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988), 267.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 189.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned *you* to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these *stones* to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7-9).

As you may notice, John was a bit of a firebrand. Pastors don’t ordinarily call their congregations “a snake pit” (although some sometimes pastors refer to their naysayers as alligators).<sup>5</sup> John pulled no punches in his preaching. He didn’t care who you were. However, rich or poor, mighty or meek, you might be, he warned that the world was about to end in fire and blood. He told the tax collectors to stop cheating people and ordered the occupying forces of the Roman soldiers to stop abusing their power (Luke 3:12-14). He even called King Herod on the carpet for his very public affair with his brother’s wife. That didn’t end well. John’s religious zeal seems to have gone quite to his head.

Frederick Buechner describes John’s preaching in this way: “Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had.”<sup>6</sup> In his preaching, John warned that the axe was already laid to the root of the tree. All the powers of the world were to be felled. Yet the only one who would get the axe was John himself—beheaded by Herod Antipas after his arrest for speaking truth to power.

In seminary, we learned that the duty of the preacher is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted: that is the goal of Law and Gospel preaching. Call people to repentance for their sins by revealing their true, ugly, nasty selves in the mirror of God’s Law. Then comfort them with the Gospel: God’s Word of forgiveness and life because of Christ’s death and

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, “John the Baptist,” in *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Buechner, *Beyond Words*, *ibid.*

resurrection. John was heavy on Law and light on Gospel. His preaching would not be welcome in a Lutheran congregation today. Maybe he really *was* a Baptist.

John's words were certainly extreme, but that doesn't mean he was a madman. John was not a madman. An ascetic? Yes, of course. But crazy? Not by any stretch of the imagination.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. "I baptize you with water," John said, "but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

And so when Jesus came to be baptized by John, the prophet demurred at first. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to *me*?!" (Matt. 3:14). To which Jesus cryptically replied, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Then John consented.

John the Baptist never wanted the spotlight. He always knew that his job was to point people to the Messiah. He wanted the spotlight to shine on *Jesus*. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And later on, when John's jealous disciples reported on Jesus' ministry, John answered with total humility, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This reminds me of Jesus' injunction to all of us: "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. Jesus the Messiah has come. So why do we still bother with John and his baptism? What does this man with two heads have to say to us today? Exactly what he said all those many years ago: "Repent!"

We're all sinners in need of repentance. "We daily sin much" (SC). Every day we must die to our sin and rise again through contrition and repentance to live a new life before God (SC, Fourth Part of Baptism). Were it not for the cross of Christ, none of us would have a hope in this world—or the next. John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins reminds us of our own baptisms, when our sins were washed away through water and the Word and the Holy Spirit came to dwell in our hearts. In his great love for us, God gave us mercy even though we didn't deserve it—and never will.

John was unworthy to untie Jesus' shoes. But we are all unworthy because of our sins. None of us deserves God's favor or forgiveness. Praise God that he doesn't give us what we deserve. "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). Instead he gives us grace as a gift and showers us with divine favor.

John was just a messenger. But the message lives on. He was a voice crying out in the wilderness. John was a voice—just one voice. But because his words are recorded in Scripture, that voice still rings in our ears and echoes in our hearts today.

John came to prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord has come already. But some Day he will come again. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. And so together we pray the prayer of Advent: *Maranatha!* ("Come, Lord Jesus!"). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.