

The Best Christmas Ever

Advent Through Epiphany Devotional – Week 3

The Church of St. John the Divine - Adult Education

* Bible quotations taken from the NIV on <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

John the Baptist the Prophet

Read Matthew 3, Mark 1: 1-11, Luke 3: 1-22, and John 1: 6-8, 15, 19-34, and 3: 22-36. What strikes you about the ministry of John the Baptist?

Matthew 3

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”^[a]

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with^[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Mark 1: 1-11

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹ The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, ^[a] the Son of God, ^[b] ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”^[c]—

³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”^[d]

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with ^[e] water, but he will baptize you with ^[f] the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke 3: 1-22

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracōnitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
⁶ And all people will see God's salvation."^[a]

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with^[b] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

The Baptism and Genealogy of Jesus

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

John 1: 6-8, 15, 19-34, & 3: 22-36

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light...

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'")...

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders^[c] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹ They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²² Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”^[d]

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

²⁶ “I baptize with^[e] water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John Testifies About Jesus

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”...

John Testifies Again About Jesus

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”^[h]

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. ³³ Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. ³⁴ For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God^[i] gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

Luke 3:2 leapt out to me, "the word of God came to John", i.e. gift of prophecy.

As Luke 3 opens, the scene is rooted in history. Tiberius, who reigned from A.D. 14-37, is Caesar of the Roman Empire. Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. and his kingdom has been divided among his sons. Pontius Pilate is governor, or procurator, of Judea, appointed in A.D. 26. Annas and Caiaphas are in the high priesthood. They officiated between A.D. 18 and 36. By compiling these dates, we learn that the events in Luke 3 occurred sometime between A.D. 26 and 36.

Look on a map of the Holy land in the back of your Bible or on the internet and locate Jerusalem and the Jordan River. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River, probably on the west side of the Dead Sea.

Note that the people who came to John in the wilderness really made quite a trek to see him!

Compare how John the Baptist is described in Isaiah 40: 3-5 and John 1: 6-8.

Isaiah 40: 3-5

³ A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD^[a];
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.^[b]

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

John 1: 6-8

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Isaiah 40:5 and John 1:7 are similar in content/meaning.

Describe John’s ministry as depicted in Matthew 3: 1-3, Mark 1: 1-3, Luke 3: 1-6, and John 1: 7-8, writing down key words below:

Matthew 3: 1-3

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

Mark 1: 1-3

¹ The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”^[c] —
³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

Luke 3: 1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God’s salvation.” [Isaiah 40: 3-5, see previous page]

John 1: 7-8

⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Using the key words above, write down John’s particular message as presented in Matthew 3: 1-2, Mark 1:4, and Luke 3:3 :

Matthew 3: 1-2

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Mark 1:4

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 3:3

³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

What was the catalyst that began John’s ministry in Luke 3:2? How do you think it was that John heard from God?

Luke 3:2

² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

John began to prophecy. I think that he must have heard God speaking just as the prophets in the Old Testament heard Him (others were not able to hear God's voice during those times; recall the prophet Samuel as a boy in service to Eli, 1 Samuel 3: 1-10, 20). Perhaps John also received messages in dreams and visions, like Joseph did when being reassured about marrying Mary and when being instructed to flee to Egypt.

Prophecy = to speak on behalf of God as a prophet (Greek word meaning 'foreteller'). From Wikipedia: In the [New Testament](#), prophecy is referred to as one of the [Spiritual gifts](#) given by the indwelling [Holy Spirit](#). From this, many Christians believe that the gift of prophecy is the [supernatural](#) ability to receive and convey a message from God. The purpose of the message may be to "edify, [exhort](#) and [comfort](#)" the members of the Church. In this context, not all prophecies contain [predictions](#) about the future.

I want to add that prophets usually speak hard truths, therefore they are not always popular with the recipients of the messages. But they do have external validation from other prophets/ priests/etc and by miraculous deeds or accurate predictions which confirm the prophet's authority is from God.

1 Samuel 3: 1-10, 20

¹ The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

² One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

⁶ Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."...

²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

Describe the physical appearance of John the Baptist from Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6 below. What is the importance of John's appearance in regard to his message?

Matthew 3:4

⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

Mark 1:6

⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

Camel's hair garments tied with leather belts were the traditional clothing of Nazirites (Numbers 6). Examples of Nazirites in the Old Testament include Samson and Samuel. Sackcloth/camel's hair cloth is a coarse cloth worn as a symbol of repentance. This garment was emblematic of John's message to repent and have your sins forgiven. See Daniel 9:3.

Numbers 6: 1-5, 8

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the LORD as a Nazirite, ³ they must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. They must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. ⁴ As long as they remain under their Nazirite vow, they must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.

⁵ "During the entire period of their Nazirite vow, no razor may be used on their head. They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the LORD is over; they must let their hair grow long... ⁸ Throughout the period of their dedication, they are consecrated to the LORD.

Daniel 9:3

³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

What was the impact that John the Baptist had upon those who came to hear him according to Matthew 3: 5-6, Mark 1:5 and Luke 3: 10-14?

Matthew 3: 5-6

⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Mark 1:5

⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Luke 3: 7-14

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

Flocks of people made the difficult trip into the wilderness to hear John preach, to seek his advice on how to live in a godly fashion, to confess their sins, and to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan River as a demonstration of their repentance. Normally, only Gentiles were baptized when they converted to Judaism. So it was significant that large numbers of Jews submitted to this spiritual washing.

Matthew 3:7 mentions that the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to see John. These are two different groups of men:

- **The Pharisees** were a legalistic and separatistic group who strictly, but often hypocritically, kept the law of Moses and the unwritten “tradition of the elders.” Although some were godly, most of those who came into contact with Jesus were envious, rigid, formalistic, and duplicitous. According to Pharisaism, God’s grace extended only to those who kept this law.
- **The Sadducees**, whose membership came largely from the priesthood and upper classes of Jerusalem, were more worldly and politically minded than the Pharisees. They made the temple and its administration their primary interest. They were theologically unorthodox, denying resurrection, angels, spirits, and future punishment and reward. They opposed the oral traditions observed by the Pharisees and accepted only the five books of Moses as authoritative.

Consider Matthew 3:7-10 and Luke 3:7-9. How does John treat these religious leaders? Do you think he is speaking on behalf of God?

Matthew 3: 7-10

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Luke 3:7-9

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

*John reams the Jewish leaders verbally. Yes, as a prophet of God, I do think that he was speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit. When John calls the religious leaders “brood of vipers”, he is in essence calling them children of the Enemy (i.e. the Serpent). Jesus Himself says that we are either children of God or children of the Evil One, there is no other option (see John 8: 31-47), and that our father can be recognized by the works we do, i.e. the fruit we produce. John the disciple also writes in 1 John 3:10 that the children of God can be recognized by their works, i.e. their fruit. This is again the same context that John the Baptist uses in the above quotations from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Later in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus uses the imagery of trees & their fruit to again discuss the state of one’s heart and the works that spring forth from that state (Luke 6: 43-45). That is **not** to say that true faith & salvation are **won** through good works, but rather that good works are the **outward sign** that true inward transformation has occurred.*

In John chapter 8: 31-47, Jesus also discusses the issue of being “children of Abraham”; many Jews rel(y)ied on their lineage and genetic inclusion in the Jewish race for their salvation, as a birthright. But John the Baptist and Jesus Himself say that true children of Abraham, which are by definition children of God, are saved neither via an accident of birth nor via any mere human work. Rather salvation comes via faith in Christ Jesus (a gift from God) and His atonement on the Cross (God’s own perfect work).

John 8: 31-47

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are Abraham’s descendants [**genetically related**]. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. ³⁸ I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence, and **you are doing what you have heard from your father.** ^[b]”

³⁹ “Abraham is our father,” they answered.

“If you were Abraham’s children [**rightfully belonging to the family of Heaven, whether through birth or adoption**],” said Jesus, “then you would ^[c] do what Abraham did. ⁴⁰ As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. ⁴¹ **You are doing the works of your own father.**”

“We are not illegitimate children,” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. ⁴³ Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. ⁴⁴ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! ⁴⁶ Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

1 John 3:10

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

Luke 6: 43-45

⁴³ “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

The Faithfulness of John the Baptist

In what ways does John the Baptist prove that he fears God and not man? See Luke 3:20 among other passages.

Luke 3: 19-20

¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

John the Baptist repeatedly calls a spade a spade regardless of the earthly power wielded by the individual (e.g. Jewish leaders with the power to excommunicate, Herod with the power to imprison & execute). He spoke what the Holy Spirit inspired him to speak without stoppering it up to avoid offense.

From Luke 3:15, what impact was the ministry of John the Baptist having on the people?

Luke 3:15

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

People were getting very excited thinking that the Christ had finally arrived. They were expecting a mighty political leader who would free them from the yoke of Rome and any other conquering earthly kingdom.

How does John the Baptist describe Jesus’ future ministry in Matthew 3:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-18, and John 1:15, 26-28? Write down words he used to describe Jesus:

Matthew 3:11-12

¹¹ “I baptize you with^[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Mark 1:7-8

⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with^[c] water, but he will baptize you with^[f] the Holy Spirit.”

Luke 3:16-18

¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with^[b] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

John 1:15, 26-28

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”)... ²⁶ “I baptize with^[c] water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

- *He will come after John*
- *Yet He was before John*
- *He is more powerful than John*
- *He is holy (John not fit to untie His sandals)*
- *He will baptize with the Holy Spirit*
- *He will baptize with fire (see 1 Peter 4:12-14)*
- *He will separate the wheat from the chaff (worthless refuse left over from the harvest)*
- *He will gather the wheat into His barn*
- *He will burn the chaff in unquenchable fire*

1 Peter 4:12-14

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

A delegation from “the Jews” of priests and Levites from Jerusalem interviewed John the Baptist. They were sent by the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of Jews composed of Pharisees and Sadducees, to look into the

identity and activities of this unauthorized teacher. From John 1: 19-25, what do they ask and how does John answer?

John 1: 19-28

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders^[c] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"^[d]

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ "I baptize with^[e] water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The Jewish emissaries had come to ask John who he was & thereby what the basis for his authority was in breaking Jewish tradition. John the Baptist was baptizing Jews for repentance of sins, whereas only Gentiles were baptized if they wanted to enter into the Jewish faith. The leaders wanted to check on four options, three spoken & one unspoken. In their opinion, John was one of the following:

- 1. The Messiah/the Christ himself,*
- 2. The prophet Elijah foretold to come again before the Messiah in Malachi 4:5,*
- 3. The Prophet foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 & 18, or*
- 4. A false prophet.*

Malachi 4:5-6

⁵ "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Deuteronomy 18:15 & 18

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him... ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.

*John, in response to the questions about **WHO** he is, tells rather **WHY** he is preaching & baptizing; he is preparing the way for the Lord as foretold in Isaiah 40:3. It may be confusing that John says that he is not Elijah – he **is not** Elijah the person **BUT** rather John **is** one who works **in the spirit and power of Elijah**, as prophesied in Malachi 4:5-6. See Luke 1:17 below for what the Angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah, John's father, before John was conceived.*

¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, [Mal 4:5] to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous [Mal 4:6]—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” [Is 40:3]

The Prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:15 & 18 is Jesus. Peter explains this in Acts 18:22 -23 when he addresses a crowd after healing a man, lame from birth, in Jesus' name:

²² For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. ²³ Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’^[a]

John Baptizes Jesus

Consider John 1:29 and what John the Baptist said of Jesus when he saw Him. Can you think of the significance this would have had for the observant Jews of that day?

John 1:29

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

An excerpt from <http://www.abideinchrist.com/selah/mar17.html> :

The lamb was the principal animal of sacrifice among the Jewish people at the evening and morning sacrifice (Ex. 29:38-42; Num. 38:3-8), and special days (Num. 28:11), the Passover (28:16-19), Pentecost (28:26f), Feast of the Trumpets (29:1, 2), the Day of Atonement (29:7, 8), and the Tabernacle (29:12-16). Other personal sacrifices included lambs (Lev. 12:6; 14:10-18, etc), such as the sin offerings (Lev. 4:32-35). Moreover, the Pascal sacrifice is basic to the whole sacrificial system (Ex. 12:13). Thus the figures in Isaiah 53:7 and Exodus 12:13 come together in the designation of the “Lamb of God.” They compliment each other.

The innocence and gentleness of the sacrificial lamb is featured in descriptions in the Old Testament. As a symbol, the sacrificial lamb prefigured the character and suffering of the Lamb of God (Acts 8:32; Isa. 53:7). Jesus is introduced in the Gospel of John as “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 1:19; Isa. 53:7).

*For the Jews of Jesus' time, lambs were a very familiar symbol of sacrifice for atonement of sins; they were presented as offerings twice daily on the altar of the tent of the Ark of the Covenant and later at the Temple (Exodus 29: 38-42). The blood of lambs was also smeared on the doorways of the Israelites in Egypt during the first Passover to signal the Angel of Death to pass over the homes of the Jews (Exodus 12). Blood was the life of the creature (Leviticus 17: 11), so to atone for sins, the wages of which are death (Romans 6:23), the blood of sacrificed creatures was splashed onto the altar as an offering to God in order to redeem (buy back) one's life. [an aside: Jesus alludes to this when He declares (**John 6:53**), "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."] These offerings were meant to impress upon the people the need for God's mercy (turn their hearts toward God) and to remind them that the price for their sins is death (realize their need for salvation). [another aside: But the blood of animals was not sufficient to atone for sins and bridge the rift between God & men, hence the need for the perfect sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world. God's provision of the sacrificial lamb when Abraham attempted to offer Isaac in Genesis 22 was the foreshadowing of how God would solve this problem Himself.]*

Isaiah 53:7

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

Exodus 12:7, 13

⁷ Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs... ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

Exodus 29: 38-42

³⁸ "This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. ³⁹ Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. ⁴⁰ With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah^[e] of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin^[d] of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. ⁴¹ Sacrifice the other lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and its drink offering as in the morning—a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the LORD.

⁴² "For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you;

Leviticus 17:11

¹¹ For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.^[e]

Genesis 22: 7-8

⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

Read John 1:35-40. Again John calls Jesus the Lamb of God. What impact does this have upon his two disciples? Name one of these disciples. Why is he important to Jesus and his plans?

John 1:35-42

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

³⁹ “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus.

Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, & another disciple of John the Baptist immediately follow Jesus. Andrew then tells his brother about Jesus and encourages him to come see Jesus too. Simon Peter later makes the declaration of faith that Jesus is the Christ. And Jesus replies that Peter’s declaration of faith is the rock upon which his church will be founded (Matthew 16: 15-18).

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, ^[b] and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades ^[c] will not overcome it.

Note that Jesus’ first two disciples, Andrew and the unnamed disciple, who is probably John the writer of the gospel, were prepared by John the Baptist to follow Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus, they immediately leave John, follow Jesus, and begin to bring new disciples to Jesus. The role of John the Baptist was indeed to prepare the way of the Lord!

Consider Matthew 3: 13-15, Mark 1:9, and Luke 3:21. Why do you think Jesus was baptized by John? (Commentators have several thoughts on this.)

Matthew 3: 13-15

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; **it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.**” Then John consented.

Mark 1:9

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Luke 3:21-22

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

I think one answer lies in Jesus’ own words in Matthew 3:15 highlighted above. He was demonstrating what we are to do in order to follow in His footsteps; in response to being called into faith, we are to submit and repent of our sins to be forgiven so that we may be allowed to enter into righteousness.

Another answer to the question of why Jesus needed to be baptized lies in John 1:31. John the Baptist says, “I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” The Holy Spirit had informed John the Baptist that he would be able to recognize the Messiah because he would observe the Holy Spirit descend & then come to rest upon the Christ in dove form after baptism (John 1: 32-34).

John 1: 32-34

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”^[1]

One Bible commentary website contends that the primary reason for Jesus’ baptism was because one of the requirements for being consecrated into the priesthood was to be baptized with water. The kind of priesthood Jesus entered into was not like that of the Pharisees and Sadducees through the tribe of Levi. This priesthood that Jesus entered into predates the Levitical priesthood instituted in the time of Moses & his brother Aaron: the priestly order of Melchizedek, a king in the time of Abraham (~400 years prior = 10 generations). See Psalm 110:1-4 and Hebrews 7. <http://carm.org/questions/why-was-jesus-baptized>

Psalm 110: 1-4

¹ The LORD says to my lord:^[a]

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

² The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
“Rule in the midst of your enemies!”

³ Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning’s womb. ^[b]

⁴ The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

Hebrews 7

Melchizedek the Priest

¹ This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ² and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” ³ Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

⁴ Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! ⁵ Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. ⁹ One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰ because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

Jesus Like Melchizedek

¹¹ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. ¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is declared:

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”^[a]

¹⁸ The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹ (for **the law made nothing perfect**), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

²⁰ And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever.’”^[b]

²² Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore **he is able to save completely**^[c] **those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.**

²⁶ Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ **Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.** ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Tell what happened as Jesus came up out of the water in Matthew 3: 16-17, Mark 1: 10-11 and Luke 3: 21-22. What would this have been like for those standing by?

Matthew 3: 16-17

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Mark 1: 10-11

¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke 3: 21-22

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

No one but Jesus & John the Baptist would have seen the Holy Spirit descending like a dove onto Jesus (John 1: 32-34). But to see the heavens opened and to hear a voice from Heaven speak must have been absolutely terrifying at this point in history before loud traffic, jackhammers, etc! Another instance where the voice of God is heard from Heaven in Jesus' presence occurs in John 12: 28-29; God's voice is perceived by some as peals of thunder. And many other places in the Old Testament & the Book of Revelation also describe God's voice as thunder or loud trumpets (Job 37:4, & Psalm 18:13 are very fine examples).

John 1: 32-34

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”^[1]

John 12: 28-29

²⁸ Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Job 37:4

After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice. When his voice resounds, he holds nothing back.

Psalms 18:13

The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded.

Notice that all three persons of the Trinity are present at the baptism of Jesus.

John Must Decrease as Jesus Increases

We know that John the Baptist was born before Jesus. What do you think he was alluding to when he said, “He was before me” in John 1:30?

John 1:30

³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’

God is eternal and existed before any humans ever walked the Earth.

Read John 1:31-34. Twice John the Baptist states that “I myself did not know Him.” What does John mean – that having grown up in the wilderness he had never seen his cousin Jesus before, or that **he did not know that Jesus was the Messiah until God gave him a sign?**

John 1:31-34

³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you

see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”^[1]

The latter!

Read John 3: 22-30 and John 4: 1-3. When the followers of John the Baptist question the popularity of Jesus, how does John answer them?

John 3: 22-30, 4: 1-3

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”^[1] ...¹ Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

How does he depict his role? Is he jealous? What is his attitude? How does this attitude of John the Baptist challenge or encourage you? What can you learn from John?

John the Baptist likens himself to the friend of a bridegroom. He is overjoyed on behalf of the groom. He tells his disciples, who I think may have been distressed or dismayed to see the crowds dwindling, to accept the fact that his own role was complete and that Jesus now had center-stage.

Verse 30 has been a particular favorite of mine and kind of a comforting anthem to remind me of why I am a mother and how I can put aside my own ambitions & vanities for the sake of raising up my children. ☺

As you think of John the Baptist’s ministry of preparing the way for Jesus, how are you preparing the way for Him in the lives of your family and friends?

With God’s help, I hope that I prepare the way for the Lord – prepare for that teachable moment when the mind & heart are opened to hear the Gospel – by the witness of my deeds & words in everyday situations.