



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 2

| *John the Baptist heralds the coming of the Messiah, Jesus.*

Introduction

On the first week of Advent the prophet Isaiah, in all his manifestations, was center stage. As a new prophet is introduced, Isaiah moves just off-stage, but Second Isaiah departs more slowly than the others, lingering to introduce this new messenger. John the Baptist, included in all four Gospels, is this singular human being. He is perhaps the only person in the Bible who is regularly named with an explanation of his work (John the Baptist or Baptizer). And no matter what you have heard or assumed, he is Jewish, not Baptist. His fame is affirmed with the report of his activities and death in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus.

John the Baptist will be introduced through his family ties and unique personality before his call and message are considered. As you read, pay attention to John's unique relationship with Jesus.

The Family of John (Luke 1:5–24, 57–66)

To learn about the family and birth of John, we step outside the lectionary passages for Year B and turn to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 1:5–24, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and announces the impending birth of a son to his wife Elizabeth. Luke's account of his encounter will be examined more fully in the next session. For now, what do we learn from this story about the family into which John was born?

We discover in verse 5 that Zechariah is a priest in the order of Abijah and that Elizabeth is descended from



John the Baptist's message was to alert people of the coming Messiah. He preached and baptized, the people repented, and God forgave.

the house of Aaron, another priestly family. We know that they are a righteous couple who follow God's commandments and regulations, such as celebrating Passover. However, they are an older couple and childless. In their culture, a barren woman was assumed to have displeased God in some way or she would be blessed with children. All this family information is found in just two verses, Luke's way of setting the stage quickly for the arrival of the angel Gabriel.

Thus John, named not for his father as was the custom of the day and to the surprise of the neighbors, is born into a Jewish family, faithful in its worship and ritual life. Given the age of his parents, we can safely assume that he is an only child. We know nothing about John's childhood except that he grew "strong in spirit" (1:80). We don't meet him again until he is about 30, and, according to Luke, "he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." Only Mark notes that John dressed in garments of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, not totally unknown as proper attire for a prophet, given that Elijah also wore

a leather belt and seems to have been known for that article of clothing (2 Kings 1:8).

Not only was John's wardrobe noteworthy in Mark, but his diet of locusts and honey is also included. Perhaps neither is surprising given that we have already learned from Luke that John stayed in the wilderness until it was time for his preparation of the people. But what must Zechariah and Elizabeth have thought of the unusual behavior of their son? His brief biographical statement might read something like this:

He was an only child, born to God-fearing parents. He had only a basic education. He never left his hometown. He had a unique diet and wore unfashionable clothing. He was loathed by some and loved by others. He died before the age of thirty-five by decapitation. Still he managed to leave an indelible imprint on history.¹

However, John's ministry was far more than these few sentences about him indicate. Leave an indelible imprint on history? You better believe it. As Gabriel predicted to Zechariah, John would prepare the people for the Lord.

The Call of John

Now we beckon Second Isaiah to come forward for a moment as words from chapter 40 introduce John in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In the Gospel of John, however, John introduces himself with the words from Isaiah 40:3 when the Levites and priests come from Jerusalem to question him, wanting to know if he is the Messiah. A careful comparison of Isaiah and any of the Gospels shows that the Gospel writers adapted Isaiah's words to suggest that the voice is crying in the wilderness rather than a voice that is crying, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." What a difference punctuation makes.

However, John the Baptist is crystal clear about his call from God and that he is the one to *announce* the coming of the Messiah. Read John 1:6–8, where an absolute distinction is made between John, the forerunner, and Jesus, the Messiah. Luke makes a similar distinction when Zechariah calls John "prophet of the Most High" (1:76) and Gabriel calls Jesus "the Son of the Most High" (1:32).

In this brief exchange with the religious officials, John is closely questioned about his identity. The first question, "Who are you?" (John 1:19) brings an immediate

PERSISTENT COURAGE

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was born into wealth, and lived the life of a rich young man until he became an evangelical Christian. His friendship with the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson and the former slave ship captain and author of the lyrics to the hymn "Amazing Grace," John Newton, involved him in the mission of abolishing slave trafficking between Africa and the West Indies on British ships. Once he was convinced of the evils of slavery and the horrendous conditions on the ships, this cause took over his life. For 18 years, he introduced bills into parliament to stop British ships from transporting black slaves, and suffered much abuse for championing this cause. His health suffered too, but he finally prevailed. In 1807, the slave trade was abolished. However, this did not free those persons already enslaved in the British Empire. Not until 1833, just a few days before Wilberforce died, was a bill passed that freed all slaves in the British Empire.²

response from John about whom he is not. John senses their real concern and says, "I am not the Messiah" (1:20). More than one idea of the Messiah existed among the people. The questions that follow illuminate some of them.

"Are you Elijah?" (1:21) comes next. One common belief of the time was that the prophet Elijah, who was whisked up to God in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1–12), would return. This is based on the words of the prophet Malachi: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (4:5–6). Notice too that the reference to parents and children is similar to what Gabriel told Zechariah about John.

Then they ask, "Are you the prophet?" (John 1:21). Another question that brings a denial from John. Moses is assumed to be the reference here, hearkening back to his words to the people in Deuteronomy 18:15, admonishing them to heed "a prophet like me from among your own people."

Part of what is behind these questions is the general assumption among the Jewish people of this time that the Spirit of God left Israel after the last Prophets

(Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) and would return only to announce the last days. Consequently, some urgency accompanies these questions. Is John the harbinger of the last days? Or, as the questioners repeat, "Who are you? . . . What do you say about yourself?" (John 1:22).

John the Baptist wastes no time and answers with the words of Second Isaiah, words they surely know: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23). Just in case they don't recognize these words, he adds, "as the prophet Isaiah said."

But the questioners are not quite satisfied. Now they want to know why John is baptizing if he cannot answer "yes" to one of their questions about his identity. In his answer, John reveals the clarity of his call. He turns their attention to the one who will come after him, Jesus. He further makes it clear that he is not even on a par with the awaited one. The servant would untie the sandal thongs of the master, but John, to further delineate himself from Jesus, says he is not worthy to do this servant's task. With that, the exchange is complete, but John, over the next two days, continues to attest to Jesus as the Christ.

The Message and Ministry of John

With a clear sense of who he was, John the Baptist carried out the ministry described by the angel Gabriel prior to his birth and by his father Zechariah after his birth. In the Gospel of John, the emphasis is on John's identification of Jesus as the Messiah. John points Jesus out to John's followers the next day when he also tells them of Jesus' baptism. John continues to point to Jesus, calling him the Lamb of God, on the third day as well. Two of John's disciples spend the rest of the day with Jesus. Then one of them, Andrew, goes to his brother Simon Peter to report that he has seen the Messiah. The brothers immediately become disciples of Jesus.

In Mark, nothing more is heard about John the Baptist until his death is reported to Jesus. Yet a closer examination of Mark 1:1-8 reveals the essence of his mission. We can see from these few verses the basic plan of John's call: he preaches and baptizes, the people repent, and God forgives. John's baptism is open to everyone; no ritual cleansing is needed to enter the "temple" where he preaches and baptizes. His baptism is not a rite that washes away one's sins, but a recognition that the per-



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son has turned around and seeks to live life according to God's ways. All that is required is repentance, but according to Lamar Williamson, the nuances of this word bring much richness to John's message. He suggests that the Greek understanding of repentance as changing one's mind and the Hebrew understanding of turning around be combined to help us gain a richer understanding of John's call to the people.³

Advent and John the Baptist

If Advent is a time of preparation, how does John the Baptist help us to prepare for the coming of the Messiah? John calls us to repentance, just as he preached to the people who came to the banks of the Jordan River. His singleness of purpose prompts us to consider how we approach the waiting and preparation of Advent or whether our efforts are scattered, without focus.

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let us all our hearts prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.

We hail You as our Savior, Lord,
Our refuge, and our great reward;
O let Your face upon us shine
And fill the world with love divine.

All praise to You, eternal Son,
Whose advent has our freedom won,
Whom with the Father we adore,
And Holy Spirit, evermore.⁴

As we light the second candle of the Advent wreath, may this candle of peace set aflame in our hearts the peace that John proclaimed in the name of the heralded Messiah.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She was the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators "Educator of the Year" in 2001. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she teaches sixth-grade church school and is clerk of session at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Robinson Jr., *7 Leadership Imperatives from a Wild Man* (Judson Press, 2008), xiii.
2. Based on biographical information about Wilberforce at www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilberforce_william.shtml and www.britannia.com/bios/wilberforce.html
3. Lamar Williamson, *Luke* (John Knox Press, 1983), 31.
4. Charles Coffin, 1736, trans. John Chandler, 1837, alt. "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry" in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #10.