

**13-Dec-2015 Sermon**  
**“John the Baptist”**  
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Text: Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist.

That’s him, over there, in the stained glass window, baptizing Jesus. I can pretty much guarantee he didn’t look that good. He wore clothes made from camel’s hair, he ate wild honey and he ate locusts. Like Jesus, he had disciples and also like Jesus, some people thought he was the Messiah. In fact, Jesus said John was the forerunner to the Messiah, the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, doing things we don’t really understand in terms of being a voice crying in the wilderness, of making rough places smooth and making the crooked places straight. He is the last person of the Old Testament and the first person of the New Testament. There’s a page devoted to John the Baptist in your Bible—it’s that blank page between the Old and New Testaments.

During Advent we typically think of the birth stories of Jesus, but these birth stories are only found in two of the gospels, in Matthew and in Luke. However stories about John the Baptist appear in all *four* gospels. His significance cannot be overestimated. He’s the one that Jesus said was, up to that point, the greatest born of woman.

There’s a great painting by Matthias Grunewald of the crucifixion of Jesus, with John the disciple and Mary on one side of Jesus, and John the Baptist, with a lamb, on the other side. The fact that John the Baptist was already dead by the time of the crucifixion didn’t bother Grunewald. And in this painting, John has the Old Testament in one hand and with his other hand he is *pointing* to Jesus. That’s his mission. His mission is to say, “Jesus must increase, but I must decrease,” as he states in John’s gospel. That’s one thing we celebrate in Advent: the mission of John the Baptist. And that’s our mission as well. Like it or not, whether we think we are or not, we *point* to Jesus, like John did. And like it or not--and it’s a very strange thing to us—but it’s also our mission to say, “Jesus must increase, but I must decrease.”

There's a sense of craziness about John. An edginess. He doesn't always say socially acceptable things. There's a bit of violence about him. He is in everyone's face. Especially, he is the fulfillment of a prophecy, namely, that before the Messiah would come, the prophet Elijah would return to earth. The Jews had a "what's goes around comes around" view of history, namely, that a lot of things that happened in the Old Testament would happen again when the Messiah came. Particularly, Elijah would come back, because, you may remember—he never really died in the first place. He was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. So, because Elijah didn't die, the Jews figured he was still out there—somewhere—and that therefore he would be a natural forerunner to come back and prepare the way for the Messiah.

He baptizes. So a word about baptism. Lots of people in the New Testament are baptized and everyone in the church who can be baptized should be baptized. But no one in the Old Testament is baptized. Baptism came in during the intertestamental period—the 4 -5 hundred years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. People who wanted to become Jews had to do three things: they had to be baptized, had to set up a pattern of giving and, if they were male, had to be circumcised.

There he is in the wilderness at the Jordan River, baptizing. Now the Jordan River is about 20 miles east of Jerusalem, about the same distance as from here to Sedro Wooley. It's a short drive but it's a very long walk—maybe seven, eight hours each way. People who went to be baptized by John the Baptist were serious people.

But he's a strange person. Frankly, he's a little bit of a kook. He didn't have great social skills. He said politically incorrect things. He died a violent death. So what place does he have in the gospels, and what is he doing here at Advent? What does he have to do with us? According to this passage, he wants us to share, to not cheat people and to be content. Good stuff. It would be a way better world if we all did that. But to get at the heart of John the Baptist, we have to go back to the wilderness and listen to him.

What is the wilderness? Well, we all have things that help us get through a day, a week, a life. Some of them are socially acceptable, others not. Work helps us. Friends help us. Television. Entertainment. Service organizations. Staying busy. Staying in touch. Kids. Coffee. Alcohol. Reading. Eating. Music. You know all those things—they help us get through a day, a week, a life. And all those are absent in the wilderness. A wilderness isn't necessarily a desert—in the Greek language the word just means any place where people don't live. The wilderness in Scripture is the place where we can depend on nothing because there's nothing there to depend on. We can choose to go to the wilderness or sometimes God will put us in the wilderness. We turn there to God because there is nothing else to turn to. By this definition, a park is a kind of wilderness. An empty lot is a wilderness. Despair and loneliness can be a wilderness.

The wilderness is where God says, "Now that I've got your attention...." And John the Baptist is the man of the wilderness. Think of him as an appointment-maker for the Messiah. That's how he prepares the way for the Lord. Like a doctor's appointment. He makes an appointment for you with Jesus and he reminds of how to prepare for that appointment. And this appointment is called Advent. Advent means, it's time to meet with Jesus at the Jordan River.

What will happen at this appointment? Well, He likely will ask us as individuals questions He asks of all: what I can do for you? Who do you say that I am? Where are you going? But He will ask us personal questions as well: this thing you are passionate about, how can we grow it? This relationship with your child, so hard for you, how can you forgive them? My church here, how would you love to serve it? This world—how would you like to help feed and heal it?

But there's something else that will happen at this appointment—something terrifying and marvelous. Let's listen to what John says: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." In this appointment then, in the wilderness, I would encourage you to pray these words, "I want you to baptize me with the Holy Spirit."

Before we get all worried about the phrase “baptize with the Holy Spirit” and start to think about speaking in tongues and prophecy and what-not, let’s remember that for Luke, the one with Holy Spirit is the one with *power*. Holy Spirit and power go together. I only have time to cite one example, but in the next chapter of Luke’s gospel, after the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, Luke writes that “Jesus returned to Galilee in the *power of the Spirit...*” So it’s not *our* power—remember, like John the Baptist, we point to Jesus; so it’s not about *us*—but the power of the Holy Spirit. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit is for God to give us His power. And we live for Him and love Him and work for Him...all in this power.

So in this Advent season I would encourage you to take a trip to the wilderness and make that appointment with Jesus that John the Baptist has set up for you. I would encourage you to say these eleven words: “I would like you to baptize me with the Holy Spirit.” And then you may be certain—absolutely certain—that He will baptize you with power.