

2. John the Baptizer



Birth of John the Baptist by Rogier van der Weyden

SO WHERE DID JOHN COME FROM?

In Matthew's story, John the Baptist springs up from nowhere like a trumpet sounding throughout the desert area in which he was living – his appearance and message were those of a prophet of old and therefore he deserved to be listened to.

It is Luke who gives us his back story as the angel visits Zechariah and tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son who they will name John, and who will be greatly used by God, bringing many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God, and preparing them for what was to happen next.

The verses quoted from Isaiah come from chapter 40, verse 3, part of an important message of hope, forgiveness and healing for the nation. This was a hope that God would come back to comfort and rescue his people. John's appearance in the desert was seen as a sign for the nation to get ready for this to happen.

GETTING STARTED

Have you ever stopped to listen to a 'soapbox preacher' or someone prepared to shout out their political message at a location such as Speaker's Corner in London? If so what was it about them or their message which caught your attention, if only for a minute?

Could you ever see yourself doing something similar?

READ THE WORD

Matthew 3:1-12 (See also Isaiah 11:1-10)

KEY VERSE

'This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying in the wilderness.

"Prepare the way for the Lord..."

(Matthew 3:3)

'Listen to me and repent!' says John. 'Be prepared, for the kingdom of heaven is near!'

QUESTION

Matthew doesn't talk of John's background, but do you think that was something that was important to those who listened at the time?

THE DESERT

It is interesting that John should spend time in the desert, as this is a big theme in Israel's history.

The people, along with several of Israel's greatest leaders including Moses, David and Elijah had spent time in the desert, and Jesus himself would spend a period at the beginning of his mission in such a place.

QUESTION

What do you think is the significance of a desert experience (or similar) to spiritual life in general?

DO WE KNOW ABOUT JOHN?

1) He was courageous in the way he took on the establishment and denounced sin wherever he found it. The Pharisees and Sadducees were stuck in the past and its strict rituals, ordinary people were living lives with no awareness of God's presence and, as Luke 3:19 reminds us, Herod had an inappropriate relationship with his brother's wife. John told them all that they needed to repent, turn around and mend their ways – it would cost him his liberty and eventually his life.

2) He was God's messenger, prepared by his time alone in the desert. This wasn't a madman spouting forth religious zeal but God's word shared by God's representative.

3) The message was not about John drawing attention to himself because everything he said pointed toward the Godhead and the one who was to come. Even his appearance looked toward the fulfilment of prophesy (2 Kings 1:8 and Malachi 4:5)

QUESTION

Looking at the passage from Matthew how would you describe John the Baptist's presentation style?

BAPTISM

John's appearance and message may well have shocked some into action, but the baptism he encouraged was even more challenging, as this was a ritual that Gentile converts to Judaism and their families underwent, and certainly not Jews. They considered their connection to Abraham was enough to make them right with God.

The baptism of converts was for purification from sin, and those who entered the water were said to have been 'born anew' or to have had their sins cleansed. The water also connected the convert to the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea.

But John's baptism is aimed at the Jews and not in a static bath or pool but in the running water of a river. It was about repentance and forgiveness. It was a humbling experience.

The river was a picture of the judgement and mercy of God flowing from God's throne and bringing both cleansing and new life within the kingdom of God. Over a thousand years previously a nation had crossed the Jordan when they entered a promised land. Now they were encouraged to go through the river again to get ready for something even greater, the establishment of God's kingdom - on earth as it is in heaven.

QUESTION

There is a divergence within Christian denominations when it comes to baptism. Some consider that this should be a vital stage in coming to faith as a young person or adult, an individual's personal decision. Others accept infant baptism, a practice certainly going back to the second century AD where adult sponsors would agree to aid in the spiritual upbringing of the child.

What are the group's opinions on this matter?

THE MESSAGE OF JOHN

John pulls no punches when he sees the Sadducees and Pharisees approaching, calling them a 'brood of vipers' fleeing from the coming wrath and as much in need of repentance as the lowliest shepherd or slave.

It is suggested that two pictures might have come to their mind; desert creatures, including snakes and scorpions, fleeing before an approaching fire, or the many small animals who make their nests within a field of corn being driven out by the farmer and the sound of the reaper's blade at harvest time.

Hopeless at a time like this to cling to a safety net of ancestry - even to Abraham who had famously found favour with God. No longer could Jews consider that they were safe simply because of that connection with the past. There is equality in God's eyes where sin is concerned. Hence the need for that baptism of repentance, the turning around and starting afresh in the knowledge of God's mercy and forgiveness.

The harvest theme returns in verse 12 with the winnowing fork on the threshing floor, a familiar enough picture for those reading or hearing these words at the time and indeed for many in the world today who don't have access to mechanical help to separate the wheat from the chaff.

John's words at the end of this passage from Matthew are a direct threat to the Jews – accept the one who is to come or reject him, there is no middle ground. There will be a harvest.

QUESTIONS

How easy is it to cling to the past, perhaps in the hope that baptism, confirmation or a Christian upbringing somehow 'lets us off the hook' when it comes to accounting for the lost years between then and now?

How can Christian parents best prepare their children for adulthood if they have not fully connected with Church and faith?



John the Baptist by Geertgen tot St. Jans, C15th

BUT THERE IS A PROMISE

John is pointing away from himself and to the one who is to come. It would be true to say that this was in a sense John the Baptist's 'fifteen minutes of fame'. Yet he talked of not being fit even to carry the sandals of the one who was to come, the one who would baptize with 'Holy Spirit and fire'.

The Jews longed for God's Spirit, the creative power in the Genesis story, to be seen again. They had committed to memory the words of Scripture that spoke of what God would do among his people.

'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you...'
(Ezekiel 36:26,27)

'And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.'
(Joel 2:28)

QUESTION

What does verse 11 say about how John saw his work?

SPIRIT WITH FIRE!

A baptism of fire conjures up more than one image, no doubt. Here John the Baptist is perhaps thinking about some of the properties of fire.

- 1) It gives light and will illuminate the darkest corners. But if the light is a beacon then it can also a guide to travellers or sailors. Fire is not always destructive. Jesus came as the Light of the World.
- 2) Fire gives warmth, and cold hearts are indeed warmed by the in-dwelling of God's Spirit.
- 3) A fire will purify, burn away the waste and reveal the beauty within.

This is a message for its time, but in a sense a message for all time. The world is not so different in its attitude to God and sin and still in need of messengers prepared to speak out in the desert.

QUESTIONS

How does verse 11 reflect your own experience of faith through baptism, confirmation or a conversion experience?

What would today's media make of John, and what would we expect from someone who seems to have a prophetic voice?

If you were in charge of the 'Preparing the Way' committee today, what methods might you have at your disposal to get the message across from your desert headquarters?

Do John's words still ring true today? To whom do you think he would direct his righteous anger if he saw them approaching the river for baptism?

'Once again, we come to the Holiday Season, a deeply religious time that each of us observes, in his own way, by going to the mall of his choice.'

(Dave Barry)

'Faith is salted and peppered through everything at Christmas. And I love at least one night by the Christmas tree to sing and feel the quiet holiness of that time that's set apart to celebrate love, friendship, and God's gift of the Christ child.'

(Amy Grant)

'My brothers and sisters, true love is a reflection of the Saviour's love. In December of each year we call it the Christmas spirit. You can hear it. You can see it. You can feel it.'

(Thomas S. Monson)

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