

**Jesus Changes Everything: Advent 2009**

**The Prelude**  
**Second Sunday in Advent**

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*Jesus Changes Everything: The Prelude*

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**Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Texts:** John 1:6-9, 15, 19-40; 3:23-36; 4:1; 5:33-36; 10:40-42; Mark 6:16-29; Matthew 11:1-19; Luke 1:5-25; 1:44; 1:57-80; 3:1-22; 7:18-35; 9:7-9; 16:16; 20:4-6; Isaiah 40:1-5

**Introduction**

God is coming to save His people, and He is sending His messenger to announce this coming. That is the overwhelming theme of the Second Sunday in Advent. God surprised the world when He sent His Son, but He also prepared the way as the prophets predicted He would. "There's work to be done before God arrives," declares the forerunner. Some of that work turns out to be purifying judgment, intended to purge sinful selfish hearts and to straighten bent and twisted lives. The world God enters is far from friendly toward His arrival. Although He brings salvation and peace, those who hear the words of the messenger resent his brazen honesty. Even as Paul summons his own churches to prepare for the "day of Christ," so the prelude to Christ's first coming includes calls to "Repent!"

It's not easy being told you aren't ready. As children, we were often told, "You can't go to school looking like that!" Or, "It's time to go. What? Aren't you ready yet? You are going to make everybody late!" Allow enough time to get ready — that was the wise counsel of attentive parents, even when we resented it. *Prelude* is partnered with *preparation* in this week's study.

Wrong ideas about the Messiah attached themselves to his forerunner whom many people mistook for the Messiah himself. "He was not the light," we will hear the Gospel writer telling his audience. Yet, he is "sent from God" to serve as a prophetic witness to the identity of the Messiah. This prelude messenger performs a needed, yet humble role in relationship to the Coming One. It's hard not being the main attraction, and this theme weaves throughout the fabric of Advent. The forerunner is not alone, but is joined by angels, shepherds, magi, and parents who each point away from themselves and toward the "light" who was coming into the world.

John's Gospel begins with a cosmic perspective: "In the beginning ..." Interspersed among these cosmic verses is the introduction of an individual human being, John the Baptist. He has a special function: he comes "as a witness," he comes "to testify to the light." And his purpose is that all the people will trust the Light. ... This week, as we move deeper into Advent and closer to Christmas, let's think about John's role as a witness to the Light -- and about how we too might be those who call attention to the light out so that others can see it. ...

"There was a *man* sent from God, whose name was John." Earth was the native home of the forerunner, and in that regard he is quite unlike the Word who was originally not a man, but God (1:1). The Word would need "to *become* flesh" so that he might live among us. The forerunner — the prophetic prelude — was *always human*. Embodied in this fact is both holy awe and human *angst*. We can scarcely grasp the wonder of God the Word becoming human. Yet, we can scarcely stand knowing that we are only human and not God. Advent is the firm reminder of our true identity. Not even the messenger who heralded the coming of Jesus could claim for himself anything more than mere humanity, commissioned by God as His servant-prophet. There is the Messiah, and he is from the beginning. There is the messenger, and he is from his mother's womb. God despises not the day of small things (Zechariah 4:10), nor should we. "Little is much when God is in it," penned

the Christian poet.<sup>1</sup> We will hear our texts this week which talk about the importance of preludes and preparation, the indispensable "little things" of Advent.

### **This Week's Main Texts: John 1:6-9, 15, 19-28**

John 1:6-9 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ... 15 ( John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")

John 1:19-28 19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." 24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

He belonged to an age that was quickly passing, part of a dying breed: he was a Hebrew prophet. During four hundred years, God seemed silent: no prophet spoke and no Scripture was written. The famine had come: "not of bread but of hearing the word of God" (Amos 8:11). Then, out of nowhere, he appears at the Jordan River announcing the long awaited kingdom of God, that time when Yahweh would be king over His people once more. While the Jewish people were accustomed to immersing themselves in water for a variety of ceremonial reasons, they normally did it with the supervision of a priest. Yet, here, in the wilderness in a very muddy river, stands an unsophisticated "man sent from God whose name was John" (John 1:6), and he is baptizing (immersing, dipping; Greek: *baptizo*) anyone who comes. Is it any wonder the religious authorities asked him, "Who are you?" (John 1:19)? It's more puzzling the sort of answer he gave.

### **The Man At The Jordan River**

John (nicknamed, "the Baptist" or, better, "the Baptizer"; in graduate school we called him "JBap"!) denied being "the Messiah", Yahweh's anointed king come to save Israel; Elijah, the prophet who never had a death certificate; or, "The Prophet", a person promised by Yahweh during the days of Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15ff). That is, John denied being anyone important by religious or political standards. The only self-identification he gave was a quotation from the prophet Isaiah (40:3; see also Malachi 3:1) that promised God's comfort to an exiled and defeated people: "I am 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of Yahweh'" (John 1:23). Just a voice. Perhaps that is why prophets commonly dressed in peculiar ways: they didn't want people to idolize *them*, but only *the words* which they spoke. Words from God *for their generation*.

From the outset, John is the "preparer of the way" for the coming of Yahweh. The world in which John lived was crooked and winding, a road filled with potholes and treacherous gullies. God had sent John to smooth out that road and get people ready: "God was coming!" Yes, this was an important mission. But John's arrival was not the main event, as John makes clear: "Among you stands one you do not know", John declares, and then goes on to humbly confess that he is unworthy to untie the strap of this man's sandal (John 1:28). Moreover, The Coming One "ranks above me because he was before me" (John 1:30). He is the "Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

1. Thus far, John walks lock-step with the understanding of the Old Testament prophets who predicted that Yahweh would one day come and remove the sin of His people (see, for example, Zechariah 3:9; Isaiah 1:18; Jeremiah 31:34; 33:8; 36:3).
2. Such sin was evident all around. Most people believed that the reason Israel lived under the Roman occupation was because Yahweh still regarded her as in exile and under judgment for her sins. The great

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Suffield, 1924.

hope was that God would one day turn away the sin and at last restore the fortunes of His people (Jeremiah 30:3).

3. And so when John starts talking about the Coming One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he draws quite a crowd at the banks of the Jordan River. People were more than willing to get in those muddy waters if it meant their sins could be taken away, and they could then see God coming once more into their world.

But then John also talks about the Holy Spirit, and that the Coming One would not baptize with water as he was doing, but with this Holy Spirit. In fact, John told them, he witnessed the Spirit descending and remaining on This One, something that took place at his baptism. This, too, was part of the Old Testament foreshadowing found in the prophets who had spoken so long ago, and perhaps clearest in Isaiah:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 **And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him**, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD (Isaiah 11:1-2).

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; **I have put my Spirit upon him**; he will bring forth justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).

"And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD. 21 "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "**My Spirit that is upon you**, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore" (Isaiah 59:20-21)

John was acquainted with these Scriptures, and so when he witnessed Jesus' arrival, he had plenty of confirmation that the man standing before him was The Coming One, full of the Holy Spirit. And John wastes no time pointing others to him. A careful reading of John 1:35-42 reveals a cascading effect, as John sends two of his disciples to follow Jesus, and, in turn, the word spreads to others. For these "heard John speak and followed Jesus" (John 1:40). Notice, *not* that they heard John speak and *followed John*. Here was a man of self-effacement, a lens through whom people might see Jesus in a clear light. Listen to the opening word's of John's (different "John"! ) Gospel:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 **He was not the light**, but came to **bear witness about the light**. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world (John 1:6-9)... John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'" (John 1:15).

### **Stepping Into the Shadows**

What sort of man is this who so willingly points the way to another, and, in so doing, he draws attention away from himself? That's what ancient prophets did: they embodied in their lives and words the life and word of God. Yahweh spoke in and through them, and they were transparent to the message they bore. Often their lives were swept up into that message, lost in its currents. Like Jonah or Hosea or Jeremiah.

Some of John's disciples were disturbed that Jesus was building a following larger than John's. "All are going to him!" (John 3:26), they complained, as if Jesus was proselytizing among John's disciples. These words are revealing. History informs us that there were many popular Messianic movements competing for the attention of the Jewish people during the time of John and Jesus. In certain cases the passion of those movements broke out in fiery revolution, even violence. Jesus himself alludes to this historical development when he says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). Perhaps the disciples of John are jealous of the Jesus movement. None of this bothers John. At least, not yet.

Instead he instructs his disciples in the relationship between himself and Jesus (John 3):

1. I told you before, I'm not the Messiah (3:28).
2. I have been sent before the Messiah (3:28)
3. As the "friend of the bridegroom", I'm here to serve Jesus who is even now in the process of taking a bride for himself. I'm certainly not going to cut in on the bridegroom and distract the bride during the great wedding party! (3:29)
4. Seeing Jesus, as the bridegroom taking his bride, is a source of genuine joy for me (3:29).
5. **Jesus must increase and I must decrease (3:30).**
6. Jesus comes from above and is above all, while I am simply of the earth (3:31).
7. Jesus comes with the true word of God, and I bear witness to its truthfulness (3:32-33).
8. Jesus has the Spirit of God given to him without limit (3:34).
9. The Father of Jesus has committed everything to His Son (3:35).
10. Those who place their trust in the Son have eternal life; those who distrust the Son face the righteous judgment of God (3:36).

Such words are spoken as we would expect from a true prophet. Taken together, John's declarations are his "witness" to the identity of Jesus. They reflect John's own sense of submission to Jesus, and his desire to see the kingdom purposes advanced through Jesus' life and work. From the human perspective it's tough work, living in the shadows. We already saw in a previous study how Joshua spent a great deal of his life in the shadow of Moses' greatness. In John's case, that subordinate role would not change, but would, as time passed, intensify. John began his work in the limelight, but would need to slip into the shadows.

When Jesus speaks about the authentic witnesses who support his own claim as God's Son, he makes reference to John in John 5:31-36:

If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true. 32 There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. 33 **You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.** 34 Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 **He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.** 36 **But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John.** For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

In this passage Jesus reinforces what John has been telling us all along: John bore witness to the truth about Jesus; his witness burned like a lamp "for a while". But even the role of John "as witness", the one role John claimed as his distinctive contribution to the kingdom work of Jesus--that role has similarly been displaced by the "works that the Father has given me to accomplish". Or, as Jesus expresses it, "the testimony I have is greater than that of John..." Would it not be natural for John to reply, "So what's left of my importance? What's my lasting legacy? Jesus, it sounds like you have it all covered." And this doubtful situation will become more intense as time passes.

### **Paying the Prophet's Price**

To add insult to injury, those in power decide that John must be silenced. Under the authority of Herod, the leadership has John arrested and put in prison. That story is told, among other places, in Mark's Gospel (6:17-29). Here is what happened:

1. John had preached fiercely against the social sins of those in places of power. One of his targets was Herod "the tetrarch", one of the sons of the late Herod the Great. The Roman government wouldn't let Herod carry the title "king", so they allowed him limited rank by giving him this lesser role. Still, he had responsibility for keeping order among the Jews, and any movement which looked threatening to the "peace of Rome" (*pax romana*) he determined to squelch. Mass movements, like those who once gathered around John before Jesus came on the scene, made him nervous. Now the *Jesus movement* had arisen and was creating a similar problem for Herod. But what pushed Herod over the edge was John's public statement that Herod had taken the wife of another against all the righteous requirements of the Torah: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife", John had said (6:18)

2. But prison was not enough for Herod's wife, who held a grudge against John and wanted him executed. In many ways she reminds us of Jezebel the queen wife of the Israelite king, Ahab, who wanted Elijah the prophet killed because he had destroyed her own prophets of the god Baal (read that story for yourself in 1 Kings 18:20-19:18). In the story, Elijah, after a resounding victory over false religion, finds himself pursued by an angry queen, and as a result, he falls into a deep depression. Shortly, we shall witness such a situation for John.
3. Before we finish Mark's account of what happened to John, it is necessary to fill in some missing details provided by Matthew (11:1-19) and Luke (7:18-35). No doubt John's imprisonment has raised serious doubts in his own mind about his mission and that of Jesus. All during his public ministry John has fully accepted his limited role as the "preparer of the way" for "The Coming One". And, when Jesus arrives, he graciously steps aside to allow the light of Jesus to burn more brightly than his own. Perhaps he wondered to himself what would become of him, once Jesus had firmly established his own mission. Perhaps John imagined that the kingdom of God would soon invade the world, with Jesus as the Messianic king. And, perhaps (and this is a big "perhaps") he, John, would be assigned an important role in that kingdom. But now John hears the news about Jesus, or as Matthew 11:2 puts it, "the deeds of the Messiah", and this provokes him to send some of his own disciples to Jesus for clarification. Their question is simple: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:3). This is a very revealing question.
  - a. Something that Jesus is doing *as the Messiah* prompts John's question. And, something *he is not doing* also puzzles him.
  - b. It's helpful to quote some portions of John's earlier preaching, because they shed light on what John imagined that Messiah would come to do: Of the Messiah, John proclaimed:

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12)

Those are sharp, cutting words. Notice, Messiah not only baptizes with "the Holy Spirit", which ought to be a very good thing, he also baptizes with "fire", for he comes to separate the chaff from the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. In other words, Messiah also comes in judgment. That sort of language comes right out of Isaiah: "You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble; your breath is a fire that will consume you" (Isaiah 33:11). John uttered these words at the end of a prophecy denouncing the false leaders of the Jewish people. Again, listen to his words:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume 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. 10 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 (Matthew 3:7-10).

There is an immediacy about this message: John talks as if all of these things are going to take place *right now* when Messiah comes. But Messiah has come, and John has introduced him to Israel at his baptism (see Matthew 3:13-17) and God has anointed Jesus to initiate this mission of cleansing Israel's sins by a baptism of fire.

- c. So John is in prison and he hears that Jesus is: teaching a message of right living ("the sermon on the mount"), counseling against retaliation for personal injury; he is commanding people to "love your enemies", give to the needy, stop judging others; he is cleansing the unclean lepers, raising paralytics, casting out demons, calling tax collectors (like Matthew!) into his kingdom, raising people from the dead, healing the blind, restoring speech to the dumb and sending out his disciples with the kingdom message to the four corners of Israel. So, thinks John, **Where is the fire? Where's the winnowing fork separating chaff from wheat?** In brief, where's the coming judgment? "I don't see it. I don't get it!" John seems to be thinking.

- d. His question might well be paraphrased: "Look, Jesus, I've gone on record telling people what Messiah is coming to do. I did my job, and here I sit in Herod's stinking prison, while you and your disciples are out gallivanting around spreading peace and joy. If you aren't going to take up the cause and fulfill the prophecy I made about you, well, maybe I was wrong. Maybe you are not the Messiah for the job. Maybe there's somebody else out there willing to step up and bring down the fire. Jesus, I've got to know: what's the story?"
- e. Can we blame him? Jesus certainly didn't. He took the time to send back a reply of confirmation and assurance to John. And the words he sends back are right from the Old Testament (compare to Isaiah 35:5, 6):

"And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me'" (Matthew 11:4-6).

The word "offended" comes from the Greek (*skandalizo*) meaning to "stumble over, trip over". Jesus seems to be saying to John, "Something unexpected has fallen on your path, John, like a big rock falling off the side of a mountain pass. It wasn't there when you walked the path before, but now it is. Don't fall over it John, for that rock is Me. You see, John, my mission is complicated, and has several parts. One part is what you correctly preached, that one day fire will fall and the evil will be consumed like chaff. But not yet. There's the wheat to gather first, and that's what I and my disciples are doing. All of the deeds you take offence at are really part of that work, John. Let me do my work in my own time. Soon enough, John, judgment will fall. Forty years from now everything now standing will be torn down, and the fire will come then. But for now, I'm doing Part One of my work. I pray, John, that you won't take offence at the divine order in which things must take place." This, I think, in the main, is what Jesus is actually saying to John. John must not allow his own preconceived notions of *when* things must happen to trump Jesus' fulfilling of God's kingdom plan. After all, Jesus is the "Lamb of God" and, as any good Jew knows, lambs must be sacrificed for redemption to flow to the people. Had he lived, John would have witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and that became the greatest stumbling block of all (see 1 Corinthians 1:23), and many Jewish people would be offended that the Messiah had to die in this way.

- f. Following this gentle but honest admonition, Jesus proceeds to eloquently portray John's ministry. Again to paraphrase, Jesus speaks to the crowds (Matthew 11:7-19): "On those days you went down to the Jordan to see John baptize, what did you expect to see? Some flimsy weed stalk blowing in the wind, bending to public opinion at every turn, dressed in sissy clothes, like that king Herod? Not on your life! The fellow you saw was every bit a prophet down to his camel's hair clothing and crude diet of locusts, a man who wasn't afraid to rough it and live off the land. And not any ordinary prophet either, but the promised messenger predicted by Prophet Malachi who has come to make my path ready. He's turned out to be the greatest prophet of all time, and for that matter he is the last of Law and the Prophets who is doing the work of Elijah *for our time*. But none of you wanted to accept him because you couldn't manipulate him or compromise him. One moment you wanted your "holy man" to be a party animal, but the next moment you complained because I was too much that way. You can't have it both ways, but like children at play, you can't make up your minds, even when John preached a message which asked you to change your minds."
4. As John sat in Herod's jail, he no doubt gave all of this some serious thought. We'd like to think that once John heard Jesus' reply, and also how Jesus eulogized him before the crowds, his mind was put to rest. The Bible does not explicitly tell us. However, it ought to be reassuring that Jesus considered him the "greatest prophet", though John's preparatory work was now finished. Whatever John's thoughts were on the day of Herod's party for his stepdaughter, they were abruptly interrupted by the tread of Herod's guards, with orders to execute this meddlesome prophet: orders that came because Herod's new wife wanted to avenge herself on John for his insulting rhetoric about her marriage. "Who is this uncouth, shabbily dressed man to tell me, the consort of Herod, that I have no business being married to him? John has no authority. He has

no power. He's a nobody compared to me. He doesn't deserve to live." While those are hypothetical words, they accurately reflect the mindset of the times when those in power freely disposed of anyone who threatened their prestige. Like water flushed into the street, John's life is poured out in a most ignominious fashion. Mark's account records how his own disciples tenderly gathered his severed head and body and provided him with a proper burial.

The enemies of the state, in the days of John and Jesus, were given little room to do mischief. Herod was the client (read "puppet") of Rome. Any talk of "kingdoms", even if the word "God" appeared in the title, made Rome nervous. We recall, at the time of Jesus' trial, how certain Jews cried out "We have no king but Caesar." They probably didn't mean it, but they knew Rome wanted to hear it. Of course, if Caesar is king, God is not; nor is Jesus. People like John who go around saying things like "I have come to clear the ground for the coming kingdom of God" don't last long. If there is only one king, in Rome's mind, there is only one kingdom: the Empire. Whether Herod beheaded him because of a jealous wife, or because Rome would decide John was a nuisance and crucify him, one way or another, John would be terminated. All the more reason to admire his courage and willingness to defer to Jesus.

To John, "The Coming One" was the central theme of his work. Nothing else mattered. **Here is the servant's heart and the servant's life, lived out of love and devotion to his master.** He knew who is master was, and he also knew the cost of following him to the very end.

### **Flashback on the Baptist: A Study in "Roots"**

It's only natural, after hearing this moving account of John's public work, to ask the question, "Where did this guy come from?" This was, after all, the burning question on people's minds when John first appeared at the Jordan River and started baptizing people. "Who are you?" (John 1:19). To the question of John's origins we now turn in our study:

We are indebted to Luke for his diligence in finding an historical source on John's family. Bear in mind, Luke very self-consciously tells his readers how he researched the material found in his Gospel (read Luke 1:1-4 for details). As scholars put it, Luke had a "Baptist Source", just as he had a source giving us details about Jesus' family. The "Baptist" material is found in Luke 1:5-24, 43-44, 57-80. A few comments about these passages will help us with the question of his origins.

1. The circumstances surrounding the conception of John are strangely familiar:
  - a. Reading Luke 1:5-24 discloses how his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were unable to have children, and how they were now well advanced in years. We are also told that they were "righteous before God" and were observant Torah Jews.
  - b. Why is this familiar? Anyone conversant with the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) would remember how Abram and Sarai could not have children for similar reasons, but God honored their faith and gave them a son, Isaac.
  - c. Another story, fresh in people's minds, would have been the birth of Samuel, another great prophet in Israel's history (Read his story in 1 Samuel 1-2). Hannah, his mother, was barren and prayed for a child whom she would give to Yahweh in the service of His priests. God granted her prayers and Samuel grew in the favor of God to become one of Israel's most effective prophets, having first served as a priest-in-training for Eli.

Whenever God intends to open a new chapter in the story of salvation history, he often reaches backward to familiar events and people, and then he reenacts their stories in the lives of new individuals he brings on the scene. God frequently used "unusual births" to get His people's attention and announce some new development in His kingdom plan. This was also true in the case of John the Baptist.

2. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth, John's parents, belonged to the tribe of Levi, for we are told that they come from priestly clans. How is this significant? It means that John was of priestly ancestry, and would have been qualified to serve the Temple ministry as his father was doing. John was, in fact, a priest by descent on *both* sides of the family tree.
  - a. The question of the priesthood, and who gets to be a priest, was hotly debated in John's day. Many Jewish people, devout in their faith, believed that the High Priest was corrupt and unqualified to serve. Indeed, the High Priest served at the whim of the Roman procurator, and could not even put on his vestments without Roman permission.
  - b. At the level of the ordinary priest, things looked different. As in the case of Zechariah, he was part of the Abijah division and was married to a priest's daughter. Faithfully, he, like countless other "ordinary priests", served the Temple ministry.
  - c. So, when we later read about John, nicknamed the "Baptizer", engaging in immersion rites at the Jordan River, what we are witnessing is a "priest's son" overseeing the self-immersion of penitent Jews who are simply seeking forgiveness for their sins and expressing a change of heart to God. What's disturbing to the authorities is that John is doing this without their express permission. But, as we have observed above, plenty of people doubted the right of a corrupt High Priesthood to guide the worship and service of the Temple.
  - d. In effect, John the Baptizer is the truly legitimate priest, doing the work of a prophet, calling Israel back to God, preparing the way for the coming of God's Messiah, and then witnessing his anointing by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. He is very much like Samuel, the priest-prophet of the Old Testament. From the tribe of Levi, he called a wayward people back to God, and finally anointed David from the tribe of Judah as King. Although Samuel previously anointed Saul as king, he only did so under protest, and later condemned his unrighteous rule before anointing David. This finds parallels in John's castigation of Herod and his baptism of Jesus.
  - e. John was leading what would turn out to be a "counter-Temple" movement, challenging the legitimacy of the religious leadership in Jerusalem, and in place of it gathering together in the wilderness a renewed people of God ready to meet its Messiah. Jesus, in turn, would carry forward that work, calling people to see him as the true Temple, encouraging them to come to him for the very things they would ordinarily seek from the Temple, and at last dying as the Lamb of God, the basis for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus would become the true High Priest in the renewed Temple of God, which was his body.
3. Did Zechariah, John's father, have any inkling that all of this was about to unfold? Certainly his vision of the angel in the Temple caught him off guard, considering the message the angel brought:

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:13-17).

To which Zechariah reacts with incredulity, and he asks for a sign. At this, the angel identifies himself as "Gabriel who stands in the presence of God". That's even more shocking to Zechariah, since Gabriel appears throughout the book of Daniel in the Old Testament as the angel of "the last days", who does battle with the evil angels, and who, through dreams and visions, announces the coming of God's kingdom. Even a first year Jewish schoolboy would know who Gabriel was, and the implications of his arrival. The sign he gives our expectant father is that he will become a mute until the child is born. Yes, Zechariah knew something was afoot, but he was "dumb struck" about the whole affair. That's often a mark of genuineness in the Bible, when someone doesn't understand at first, but allows God to make it clear: "which will be fulfilled **in their time**" (Luke 1:20).

4. The next set of passages from Luke's account tell how Elizabeth becomes pregnant and remains secluded for five months. But now her life will become entangled in wonderful ways with a much younger relative: a young woman named Mary. Mary has her own story, even more remarkable, but also prompted by the appearance of Gabriel (read that account in Luke 1:26-38). **To the informed reader of Luke's narrative, two "Gabriel sightings" are no accident.** Indeed, Gabriel's appearance to Mary explicitly announces the coming of Jesus who is "Son of the Most High", about to be born of a virgin. Moved and puzzled by this message, Mary seeks out none other than her kinswoman, Elizabeth!
  - a. The visit of Mary to Elizabeth (see 1:39-56) leads to a most remarkable declaration from the mouth of the aged woman: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (1:42-45).
  - b. "Filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb", that was the promise given Zechariah by Gabriel earlier in this chapter. Now here, in the words of John's mother, is the testimony that John, "the unborn", rose in recognition that "the Lord", also "unborn", was present in the room.
  - c. **The elder bestows blessing on the younger.** That is the pattern found in Scripture. Elizabeth assumes a maternal role in relationship to Mary, and she confers a matriarchal blessing on her young "daughter". This is both moving and significant. Significant because a new family is rising within Israel, composed of men and women who passionately seek God's kingdom, and are open to the new ways God chooses to work in the world. Here are the two mothers who stand at the beginning of this remarkable series of events unfolding within Israel. Aged Elizabeth, who like Sarah and Hannah, receives the unexpected covenant blessings of God; young Mary who bears the fresh new message that Messiah is coming into the world. Here are two faithful women whose receptivity to God's word leads to the births of John and Jesus, who in turn respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit **in their mother's wombs!**
  - d. Good roots. John and Jesus rose from a godly heritage. Even as early as the fifth month of her pregnancy, Elizabeth foreshadowed that Mary's unborn child was "my Lord" (1:44), even as John would in his adult life confess "I am not the Messiah, but am his forerunner whose sandals I am unworthy to untie." This is how salvation history works: God foreshadows His purposes through the lives of people like Elizabeth, Zechariah and Mary. And John the Baptizer had this as his godly legacy.
5. Luke's record includes a great deal of poetry and song. Much of it drawn from numerous texts out of the Old Testament.
  - a. For example, "Mary's Song", sometimes called "The Magnificat" because it begins with the words "My soul **magnifies** the Lord", owes much of its language to the prayer of Hannah found in 1 Samuel 2, as well as several references to the Psalms, too numerous to list here. Perhaps most importantly, her song reveals her willingness to be "humble" before the Lord, accepting his word and doing his will. Several phrases include words like "humble", "hungry", "servant". And this song predicts the overthrow of the mighty from their thrones to allow room for God's kingdom to come.
  - b. Later, when John is finally born, we read of the God-given name he is to bear: "John", a name Zechariah cannot vocalize at first because he is still mute. But once he pronounces John's name, his tongue is "freed" and he speaks openly about what has taken place, expressing it in poetry. What does he say in what is commonly called "The Benedictus" (from the Latin, "Blessed")?
    - i. Blessed be Adonai Elohim of Israel ("Lord God") for visiting and redeeming his people.
    - ii. God has raised up a savior-king from the house of David in fulfillment of the prophets' words. Notice: he does not begin his song with praise for his own newborn, John (from the house of Abijah, Aaron and Levi), but for Jesus from the **house of David.**
    - iii. This One will save us from our enemies.

- iv. This One will bring us the mercies of God, honoring his covenant promises made to Abraham.
- v. This One will allow us to **serve You with righteousness and holiness**. (Spoken like a priest who is none too pleased with the corrupt High Priesthood, and who instead desires a **holy** priesthood where he and his fellow priests can "serve" God truly. This word for "serve" is *latreuo* and is a technical term for priestly work)

Note: Only after Zechariah has placed Jesus **at the beginning of his song** does he go on to explain the role his own son, John, will play in the wonderful story he is telling.

- vi. John, you will be called "Prophet of the Most High" to prepare the way, give knowledge, and teach the way of salvation for God's people **so that their sins can finally be forgiven**. (Zechariah longs for a "prepared people" who are forgiven by God. That's ironic, no doubt, in Zechariah's mind. "Here I am, a priest, participating in a priestly service intended to cleanse people of their sins. Yet, they apparently aren't truly clean. But now God is giving us an opportunity to correct all of this by sending the Messiah and his forerunner, so our sins can be forgiven".)
- vii. Zechariah's closing words must be quoted:

"...because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-80).

- 6. **The elder will serve the younger**. The fresh arrival of God's kingdom in history is commonly serenaded with this kind of song. The New Kingdom comes with the New Song. Zechariah would have been familiar with this form of communication, since priests and Levites were often charged with the duty of providing music for Temple events. But this is no ordinary Temple event. Our aging priest is telling the story of how God has once more visited His people through the birth of two sons. One will prepare the way for the other. Their lives are inextricably connected, but "the elder will serve the younger". True, those words don't actually appear in the text of Luke. But they do appear often in the Old Testament when God turns the tables on the ordinary way of doing things in order to introduce a new development for His people.
- 7. **John will serve Jesus**. That's the plain implication of these passages from Luke's source. It wasn't some afterthought or later development. Jesus didn't just show up one day and push John aside, building a Messianic movement that would outshine John's. No, God through the Holy Spirit (notice how the Holy Spirit fills both Elizabeth and Zechariah before they speak: Luke 1:41 and 67) communicated to Zechariah and Elizabeth His purposes for both John and Jesus even before they were born! That, too, was a common trait of God's prophets in the Old Testament: to be called from their mother's womb (see Judges 16:17; Psalm 22:10; 71:6; 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5; and also Galatians 1:15-16 as another New Testament example). So from before his birth, John was called in some mysterious and wonderful way.
- 8. But then the fateful day arrived. John, the young man, leaves home, but not to seek his fortune or to make a name for himself. Not even to attach himself to an elderly priest in the Temple (as Samuel did to Eli in 1 Samuel 1-2). Instead, we read in Luke 1:80, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was **in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel**." Some scholars have offered the suggestion that John joined up with a dissident group of Jews who lived near the Dead Sea, commonly called the "Essenes". These were separatists who believed that the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem was corrupted and, by withdrawing into a communal society "in the wilderness", they hoped to purify themselves and prepare themselves to become the army of God ready for battle at "the Day of the Yahweh". We know them, of course, through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of which tell us a great deal about what they thought and believed, as well as which Old Testament Scriptures they valued the most.

But was John really a part of this movement? We can't say for certain. Just because he was "in the wilderness" doesn't mean he was at Qumran (the Dead Sea community). Certainly his message was fiery like theirs. But they looked for two or three Messiahs with carefully defined roles, whereas, John predicted only One Messiah and considered himself to be simply "the voice *crying* in the wilderness" and not part of a whole community *living* there! What we *can* infer is that the wilderness experience paralleled that of Moses in the book of Exodus, for it was there that God prepared His prophet for the all-important work of emancipating Israel from Egyptian slavery. And it was into the wilderness that Moses led Israel, to prepare her for her future by bringing her at last to the banks of the Jordan River, ready for Canaan. Finally, it was up to Joshua to lead Israel across the Jordan River and into the promised land, just as it would be up to Jesus (read Yeshua=Joshua) to bring Israel into her full salvation, promised by John's preaching. For John's part, he is warning people to "flee from the wrath to come" and to repent of their sins, expressing their need for God's cleansing by baptism in the Jordan River. That's right: at the Jordan River, the same place Israel camped before Joshua led them into Canaan. John's job was get Israel to the Jordan River, in the wilderness, where they repent and prepare themselves for the next great event.

9. John was truly "the wilderness man", taking his people into a place where they looked entirely to God for their existence, as did their ancestors centuries before. Stripped of all ordinary comforts out in the desert, John calls his people to "strip themselves" of their sins and cast themselves wholly on the mercy of God. By his own example, John shows what that kind of obedience looks like. It meant putting God in first place and themselves humbly at His service.

When Jesus arrives, when God finally "comes", John exemplifies how Israel is to meet Him: humbly and like servants before their Great King. "He must increase and I must decrease", John quietly concedes in John 3:30. That was, for all intents, his life's message, and should be for us, our life's verse.

## Concluding Thoughts

This section of John's prologue has significance both theologically and practically. Theologically John's worldview confronts false worldviews. Jesus Christ alone is the true agent of divine revelation—contrary to false agents of revelation from the first to the twenty-first centuries. Jesus' role as the true Light assumes what John had already said in verse 5, namely, that the world is shrouded in darkness, that is, sin in all its manifestations—unbelief, rebellion, falsehood, hatred.

John the Baptizer is a role model of three qualities a witness for Christ should have.<sup>2</sup>

First, John had a *self-denying attitude*. An important principle of witnessing is that believers must not promote themselves. In John's day spiritual gurus sought their own glory. But he rejected all temptations for personal glory. An effective witness for Christ puts aside his or her likes, dislikes, needs, personal interests, comfort zones, and ambitions.

Second, John had a *Christ-centered message*. A person's witness must be given verbally about Jesus Christ. Unfortunately the present age may be called the era of silent Christianity. A young man went from a Christian home to a secular university. His parents were concerned about him. When he arrived home at Christmas his parents asked him anxiously, "How did you get along?" He answered, "Oh, I got along great. Nobody even knows I am a Christian." While friendship evangelism is important, it is not enough. The biblical concept of evangelism and witness involves presenting verbal testimony, a message with two parts: who Jesus is and what He has done.

Third, John had the *goal of winning others to personal faith in Christ*. He bore testimony so that people might believe. This means that believers must encourage the unbelievers to respond to Christ, in hope that they will win them to the Savior. This is illustrated in John 1. John the Baptizer gave his testimony to Andrew and John (later the apostle John) and they believed. Andrew in turn witnessed to Peter, and later Philip witnessed to Nathanael.

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Macleod, "The witness of John the Baptist to the Word: John 1:6-9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 no 639 JI-S 2003, p 305-320.

Missiologists have pointed out that often a foreign missionary, with little knowledge of the language or culture, wins the first convert of a tribe. Examples are Paul the Greek Jew who took the gospel to Asia Minor; Augustine, a Latin from Rome, who took the gospel to England; Boniface, an Englishman who took the gospel to Germany; Patrick, of a high family in Britain, who took the gospel to Ireland; Hudson Taylor, an Englishman, who took the good news to China; and Jim Elliot and other young Americans, who brought the message of Christ to the Aucas in Ecuador.

Charles Spurgeon once preached:

It is always unwise to get down a biography and say, "Oh! I cannot be right, because I have not felt all this good man did." If a child of ten years of age were to take down the diary of his grandfather and were to say, "Because I do not feel my grandfather's weakness, do not require to use his spectacles, or lean upon his staff, therefore I am not one of the same family," it would be very foolish reasoning. Your experience will ripen. As yet it is but natural that it should be green. Wait a while and bless God for what you have.<sup>3</sup>

John the Baptizer might well have taken down the biography of Isaiah or Malachi and wondered aloud at their eloquence or courage, and then stammered about his own. Yet, as we have clearly noted in this week's study, he was likely have been humbled by their words, for they pointed to him — a voice crying in the wilderness.

We leave this week's study with sturdy counsel from a wise pastor:<sup>4</sup>

"I am not the Messiah," John said.

The negative affirmation may seem obvious, but consider the degree to which faith draws us toward a more positive set of identifications. We are anointed people. We are in Christ and he lives in us. We are his agents, his hands in the world. We are called to emulate him, to cross the false and imprisoning boundaries of the world with God's transgressively redemptive love. We are to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. As Luther said, we are to be "little Christs," and in no small and timid way. We do have a messianic calling, don't we? We are needed and called to do what Jesus would be doing.

All of that is true and worthy to be recalled. But in John the Baptist's denial is the opposite point, and it too speaks needed truth to *Who am I?* or *Who are you?* That truth is "Not the Messiah."

Messianic ambitions for ourselves and messianic expectations of others are not just the quaint delusions of people certified as mentally ill. They are found in us as we seek too much from others or wish to be too much to them. The messianic impulse, the assumed role of rescuer of the other, can diminish and destroy. And the reciprocal expectation that this special person will be a savior is not limited to the private spheres of life. These are issues in international relations, in social movements and classes, in political appeals. We see dangerous faith placed in false messiahs and messianic arrogance in nations and ideologies.

In this context, it is salutary that we should remember John the Baptist's pointing away from himself and to Jesus. We are not, any or all of us, the Messiah. That position has already been filled. To let Jesus be our Christ, our anointed savior and rescuer, may still entail seeking to be engaged in his saving work and mission—of course it does—but it also commands us to humility, a letting go of our seducing desires either to rescue or to be rescued by charismatic others. We already have a Messiah, and he ain't us.

In John's Gospel, this needed humility is worked by focusing on Jesus, the light to which both John the Baptist and John the evangelist were sent to testify. In the synoptics, however, and especially in Mark, focusing on Jesus reveals something curious: it is a quality of the Messiah himself to do something very like what John the Baptist does. Jesus points away from himself and seeks to deflect the messianic expectations put upon him. Trying to

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<sup>3</sup> From a sermon delivered by C.H. SPURGEON, At the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Lord's Day Evening, 27th August, 1871.

<sup>4</sup> John Stendahl, "Reflections on the Lectionary: John 1:6-8," *Christian Century*, December 2, 2008, p. 21.

evade his superstar status and the attributions of glory, he points instead to what is near and soon and stirring already in the lives of those to whom he speaks.

What follows are the readings for the Second Sunday in Advent, Cycle C of the lectionary. They adhere to our general theme, and then add further flourishes. We invite you to meditate on their words worshipfully and prayerfully. Allow the prayers to deepen your fellowship with the Christ whose way we prepare.

## **The Readings**

### **Old Testament Reading: Malachi 3:1-4**

1 Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

### **The Psalm: 126**

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Desert! 5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! 6 He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

### **New Testament Reading: Philippians 1:3-11**

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

### **The Gospel: Luke 1:68-79; 3:1-6**

68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people 69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; 72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

3:1 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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

## **The Prayers**

*Thematic*

God of timeless grace,

you fill us with joyful expectation.  
Make us ready for the message that prepares the way,  
that with uprightness of heart and holy joy  
we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son, Jesus Christ,  
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

*Intercessory*

God of hope,  
you raised up John the baptizer  
as a herald who calls us to conversion.  
As we joyfully await the glorious coming of Christ,  
we pray to you for the needs of the church and the world.

*Prayers of the People, concluding with:*

Hear our humble prayer  
that we may serve you in holiness and faith  
and give voice to your presence among us  
until the day of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

*Scripture*

Out of the embrace of mercy and righteousness,  
you have brought forth joy and dignity for your people,  
O Holy One of Israel.  
Remember now your ancient promise:  
make straight the paths that lead to you,  
and smooth the rough ways,  
that in our day  
we might bring forth your compassion  
for all humanity. Amen.

Glory to God! Amen.

**Digger Deeper:** *Jesus Changes Everything: The Prelude* — Second Sunday in Advent  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Jesus Changes Everything: The Prelude*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

Read carefully the selected passages in John's Gospel: John 1:6-8, 15, 19-40; 3:23-36; 4:1; 5:33-36; 10:40-42

1. Why might some people have mistaken John the Baptizer for the coming Messiah?
2. What is the single most important work God calls John the Baptizer to do?
3. How could people have misunderstood John's true calling?
4. Why do you think it's significant that John carries out his work at the Jordan River and in the wilderness? Can you recall any Old Testament parallels?
5. When he speaks publicly, does John reveal any doubts about his relationship to Jesus? Describe that relationship? What passages from John's Gospel best express this? Can you find a "life's verse" for John the Baptizer?

Read carefully Mark 6:16-20, along with Matthew 11:1-19; 3:1-12

6. In what difficulty does John find himself as his ministry comes to an end?
7. What religious and political forces seem to be at work in John's world, leading to his troubles? Does this sort of thing happen today to God's messengers?
8. John faces his doubts from a very dark place. Why do you think John had second thoughts? How does he express them in the Matthew 11 passage? Have you had similar doubts?
9. Is there anything in John's preaching (see Matthew 3:1-12) that might help us answer question #7?
10. Do any of John's doubts bother Jesus? How does Jesus answer John? How does he honor John?

Read Luke chapter 1

11. What does Luke tell us about the parents of John? The circumstances of his birth? Does any of this seem familiar? How important is a godly upbringing?
12. In what ways is the future relationship of John and Jesus foreshadowed in this chapter?
13. Read Zechariah's song (1:67-79). How does he connect John and Jesus?
14. In the same song does Zechariah say things that show his priestly background? What does he want for God's people more than anything else? Did John follow in his footsteps?
15. Where did John go when left home? Why is this significant, do you think?