

John seemed to appear out of nowhere, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance” (*Luke 3:3*)

- He looked more like a desert rat than a religious type, but considering how challenging his message was, he was surprisingly popular
- There was a resemblance between John and the Hebrew prophets, but rather than calling Israel back to the covenant, he had something new in mind
- “Prepare the way of the Lord,” he said, for soon “all flesh shall see salvation.”

People must have been puzzled, wondering whether or not this was good news

- They remembered the time of the Old Testament prophets, who foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon
- Tensions were running high between the Israelites and their Roman rulers—perhaps a crisis was near
- Crowds flocked to the Jordan River to hear him preach, for it was clear that the word of God had come to John in the desert

We’ve jumped into the middle of this story, so I’d like to review what happened before

- John didn’t actually come out of nowhere, though the residents of Jerusalem may not have heard of him
- He came from a long line of priests, going back more than a thousand years
- His father Zechariah carried on that tradition in a village in the Judean countryside
- Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had been childless for decades, “getting on in years” when remarkable things began to happen to them (*Luke 1:7*)

The people of their village joined the whole nation in journeying to Jerusalem to observe the great holidays

- Israel’s not a very big country geographically—imagine if everyone living on the Front Range from Colorado Springs to Fort Collins went to Denver to celebrate together at the state capitol
- Every day the worshipers gathered at the magnificent Temple, first built by Solomon and then restored by King Herod

The Temple precinct was huge, mostly outdoors—anyone could enter the Court of the Gentiles, where it was possible to buy sacrificial animals or exchange Roman money

- After going up a few steps you came to the Women’s Court, which was open only to Jews
- Then a few more steps led to men gathered at the Court of Israel, and finally to the Priest’s Court, where the ornate sanctuary stood

One year Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary and burn incense on behalf of all the people praying outside

- When he approached the altar, Zechariah was startled to discover an angel of the Lord at his side
- Overcome by fear, he barely heard the angel’s first words, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and... he will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.”

There’s no way to prepare for such a moment in our lives—even a faithful priest like Zechariah was overwhelmed, and his human limitations rose to the top

- “How will I know this is so?” he asked the angel. It doesn’t make any sense—my wife and I are old. Show me a sign so that I may believe...
- Afterwards Zechariah regretted his reaction, which implied that what he had seen wasn’t clear enough
- The angel simply replied, “I am Gabriel, sent by God to bring you this good news. But now...you will become mute until the day these things occur.”

What was Zechariah supposed to do about that?

- When he finally came out of the sanctuary, people were wondering what had happened
- Seeing his dazed expression, his neighbors helped him home, where he and Elizabeth soon conceived a child
- Despite her delight at this turn of events, she hid out for five months before making a public appearance

- Then the eyes popped and the tongues began to wag—you know how it is in a small town—her pregnancy and the child’s birth were prime news throughout the hill country

Clearly being a priest couldn’t protect Zechariah from a serious lapse of faith

- Being sorry about it didn’t change anything—he had no choice but to go on a long “silent retreat”
- Because there was no quick resolution of his problem, Zechariah had an opportunity to learn from his mistake
- For one thing, being mute for nine months gave him plenty of time for reflection—to digest the experience that had overwhelmed him in the moment

At home and in the village, Zechariah was forced to hear what people were saying about all of this

- More importantly, he listened intently to the guidance of the Spirit, searching for the still, small voice of God
- Without knowing exactly what lay ahead, he was preparing for the time when he would be able to speak
- What seemed like a harsh punishment was really grace-filled for Zechariah, for he was able to make the deeper life changes which signify true repentance

The transforming moment came not at the birth of his son, but a week later when the child was circumcised and named

- The relatives all assumed they’d call him Zechariah after his father, so when Elizabeth gently suggested another name they objected loudly:
- John! What kind of name is that? No one in this family has ever been called John!
- Zechariah jumped up in the midst of them all and wrote on his slate, “His name is John.”
- Then his tongue was unleashed, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he poured out the most extravagant praise of God

We read/sang the Song of Zechariah as our Psalmody today—it’s an eloquent testimony to the place of Jesus in the biblical story

- Remembering the promises of God’s Covenant with Israel and anticipating the Messiah, he anointed his son as “the prophet of the Most High,” for “you will go before the Lord to prepare his way” (*Luke 1:67*)
- Zechariah ended his witness by giving thanks for God’s mercy:
*In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness & the shadow of death
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

In everyday speech, repentance is associated with regret for past actions

- But that doesn’t begin to capture the word’s full meaning—it comes from a Latin root meaning “a renewal”
- Theologian Lewis Rambo states that “repentance is not a single act, but an ongoing responsiveness to the will of God.” (*Westminster Dictionary of Theology, p. 499*)
- “When confronted with the reality of his or her failures and the magnitude of the gulf between the individual and the perfect will of God,” Rambo writes, “concrete steps are necessary for the renewal of life in Jesus Christ to occur. The genuineness of one’s repentance is demonstrated by actual changes in actions...”

Which brings us back to a wild-looking, Spirit-filled preacher on the banks of the Jordan River

- Our Gospel reading tells us “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness”
- His whole life was preparation for that moment, and he must have learned from his father what it means to make a new beginning after a grievous error
- Without going through that painful process, Zechariah would never have known his need for God’s grace and the joy of experiencing “the tender compassion of our God”
- He provided his son with a model of true repentance, sparking the insights of John’s powerful preaching at the river

Today, as we anticipate another Christmas celebration, John is speaking to us

- It's so easy to get busy and never take the time to reflect deeply on the ways we've hurt other people, or the things we've left undone
- We can lose sight of our need for God's grace and the sweetness of God's mercy
- If we take it seriously, "preparing the way of the Lord" could become a process of moral and spiritual renewal
- Wouldn't that make the coming of the Christ child a lot more meaningful to us?

John the Baptist didn't just appear out of nowhere

- His life and family and ministry were steeped in the Spirit—the hand of God was upon him from beginning to end
- He knew the true meaning of repentance and made sure his actions reflected his ideals
- No wonder people flocked to the waters to be baptized by John—they thirsted for the new start in life which he offered

Let us pray.

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.