

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 18, 2022

“John the Baptist”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Fourth and last Sunday of Advent. We will light our last Advent candle today, and prepare for Christmas, or as John the Baptist might say, “prepare ye the way of the Lord”.

But who is John the Baptist in the context of Jesus’ life? And why would Jesus express that John, the one who led the way to Jesus’ ministry would be the last? Let’s take a dive into the story of John.

Last week we had the angel tell Mary she was going to have a child, and a few months later we are then told that the same angel Gabriel tells Mary her cousin Elizabeth would also have a baby- even in her old age. Upon hearing this, Mary set out to visit Elizabeth, and upon her arrival to Elizabeth’s house, John leaped in his mother’s womb when he sensed the presence of the Messiah/Jesus within Mary. This was the first time John proclaimed Jesus as The Anointed One.

Apart from Jesus Christ, John the Baptist is probably the most theologically significant figure in the Gospels. As with Jesus, his birth was recorded. His entrance into the world was marked by angelic proclamation and divine intervention, and John's birth not only parallels that of Jesus, but echoes the momentous occasion of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. John is clearly a pivotal figure in the salvation history of God.

As he grew, John felt led to the desert to prepare the way of the Lord. He lived on wild honey and locusts for years, while preparing himself for the mission of preaching the coming of the Messiah. He baptized others and called for repentance of sins, preaching that One greater than him was coming.

Although his formative years were lived in obscurity in the desert, his public ministry ended nearly four hundred years of prophetic silence. No one had spoken for God in all that time.

John was also not a "crowd pleaser." He willingly confronted the hypocrisy of the religious establishment. He did not hesitate to expose the immorality of Herod and eventually chose to die a martyr's death rather than compromise his convictions.

All of these characteristics portray John as a fiery prophet proclaiming the apocalyptic message of God. Indeed, Luke says that John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah". He goes on to allude to Malachi 4:5, which states that Elijah will return "before that great and dreadful day of the Lord." In fact, some contemporaries of John inquired if he was Elijah, to which his answer was always no. John would not be alive and therefore never hear of Elijah returning during the transfiguration of Jesus.

In this sense John's message and ministry marked the culmination of the law and the prophets, by heralding the breaking in, and the coming of, the kingdom of God. So, John was truly a transitional figure, forming the link between the Old and New Testaments. He spans the ages with one foot firmly planted in the Old Testament

and the other squarely placed in the New, and this is to what Jesus is referring to in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 11.

*Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

What Jesus is saying is that John the Baptist is the greatest of men to be born up to that point in time. This is the break with the old and the very beginning of the new. Why is this so? Because John, a prophet, has actually seen what all the other prophets were looking forward to, he has seen and directly testified to Jesus. He was the first to see him as the Messiah, and also died before he could experience Jesus' resurrection.

So why is John least in the kingdom? It's because everyone who is born after John and who recognizes Jesus are part of the New Testament story, is part of the new Kingdom of God. You and I are part of the Kingdom. The people after John have experienced the resurrection story and have seen the fulfillment of God's plans in Jesus.

John prepared the way for Jesus; Jesus became the way. This Advent season - have you prepared the way to let the light of Christ in your life?

I am sure we all know that in truth we do not know if Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In fact, some factions of Christianity have moved that date around a bit. However, I am sure it is no coincidence that this week, the week just prior to Christmas, we have the Winter Solstice. This means that by the time we celebrate

the coming of the light of Christ into the world, we will receive an extra minute of light added to our days.

Light has a way of revealing the truth. John the Baptist's whole purpose was to prepare the world for the truth, for Jesus, to prepare us for a light to shine on us so brightly that we ourselves can see where we did not love enough, try enough, let go enough, forgive enough. And yet that light also brings us forgiveness and grace.

As you are preparing for your Christmas celebrations, prepare the way, toss out what no longer serves you to make room for the love and light of the Christ child. For the simple, the trusting, to find in your faith a warming blanket in a world that is very different from what we used to know.

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” repent and get ready to be restored, renewed, forgiven and blessed, as the light of God enters our hearts once again. **Amen**