

# John the Baptist: The Last Great Prophet

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Luke 3:4-6

We are in December, the second Sunday of Advent, and we've started singing carols. The decorations are up, and we're getting ready. I wonder what getting ready for Christmas means for you-buying presents, putting up the tree, making plans to see family, and planning services. Much of that happens in November. For me, there is the important question of which staff member will wear the inflatable camel outfit this year.

But the gospel writers highlighted the need to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, and the person in charge of the preparations was **John the Baptist**. In the traditional church calendar, the second Sunday of Advent is known as *John the Baptist Sunday*. His job was to herald the coming of Jesus and prepare people for the coming of the King.

In ancient times, when a king chose to visit a town, a herald was sent months beforehand to announce the news and tell people to prepare-tidy the town, arrange hospitality, and ensure the roads were good so the king's entourage wouldn't get stuck in potholes. It was a kindness to give notice. Imagine if King Charles walked in here today-we'd need some warning.

Luke describes John the Baptist as the herald of the Lord, as Isaiah had prophesied:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.  
Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.  
And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

- *Isaiah 40:3-5 (as quoted in Luke 3:4-6)*

Luke is keen to show that God’s salvation is for all people. Throughout his Gospel he includes characters of different backgrounds, genders, and status.

A few hundred years earlier, Zechariah encouraged the returning exiles to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple as a house of prayer for all nations.

*“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”*

- *Mark 11:17*

With Jesus’ coming, that vision was being fulfilled. Everyone needed to prepare: Jews, ordinary people, tax collectors, soldiers.

John was known as the baptiser. Baptism was familiar to the Jews through immersion in a *mikvah* for ritual cleansing before going to the temple. But John offered baptism as a sign of **heart-change**, not ceremonial washing. He focused on repentance and forgiveness. Christian baptism later added the symbolism of death and resurrection—down into the water and up again, born again spiritually.

John's preaching style was challenging:

*"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."*

- Luke 3:7-8

He said that a tree is judged by its fruit. You might be religious or powerful, but those things don't count if your heart is wrong. Matthew points out that he directed his hardest words towards the Pharisees and Sadducees, whose attitudes and teaching were poisonous. The cure for heartless religion is repentance. We cannot simply go through the motions or put on an outward appearance.

This is challenging for any preacher. What am I really feeling in my heart as I deliver this? Am I a viper, or a heart-sharer? We all need awareness of our continual need for transformation. Poison can leach into our lives in many ways.

John called out three key issues: **inequality, corruption, and exploitation.**

He said:

- The person with two shirts should give one away.
- Tax collectors should avoid corruption.
- Soldiers should not exploit their power.

These challenges apply to us. Are we content with inequality? Are we ever corrupt in our dealings? Do we live comfortably within systems that exploit others? Perhaps we need to ask the Lord what we can do this Advent: examine our generosity, or challenge inequality where we see it increasing.

The good news is that tax collectors and soldiers were the ones coming to John for baptism. They knew their hearts needed transformation. Whatever our situation, God offers us the opportunity to change. We can ask, "Lord, what do you want me to do today?" No one is beyond redemption.

John said that the Messiah would bring a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

*"He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

- Luke 3:16

The Holy Spirit empowers us to live a godly life and cultivates the fruit of the Spirit-love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. He gives spiritual gifts to build up the church.

But fire is more sobering: the consuming fire that strips away pretence, the refining fire that purifies and makes holy, the fire that brings everything into the light.

Thankfully, John's Gospel reassures us:

*"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

- John 1:14

Jesus came full of grace. He took our sin upon Himself on the cross so that we may receive forgiveness, peace, and joy.

I recently read the story of the last hangman in England, who had executed hundreds and carried deep trauma. He was violent in thought and action, but one day was brought to Smith Wigglesworth's chapel. Hearing the gospel of grace, he broke down, and after hours of weeping received Christ. He later became the primary advocate for ending the death penalty.

Jesus said:

*"If you love me, keep my commands."*

- John 14:15

Obedience is costly. It means we cannot live by our own standards or society's standards. Jesus brings grace and truth, the Holy Spirit and refining fire-comfort and challenge. We need both if we are to live effectively as disciples.

At Pentecost, Peter said:

*"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

- Acts 2:38

So repent and be baptised, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Praise God for his gift. Are we prepared to go for that today?

## Closing Prayer

"Heavenly Father we thank you that Jesus came full of grace and truth that Lord as well as the great to be transformed, to change our thoughts and attitudes. You give us the Holy Spirit. You give us your grace to enable us to do that. So Lord, today we pray that you will convict us of what you'd like us to do. And Lord, that you would empower us in order to do it. Thank you, Father, that you are here. And we thank you for this Advent season. We thank you for your grace to us. And your call for us to be obedient to your will and your ways. Amen."