Who is St. John the Baptist?

Reflections on our Parish Patron Saint

by Father Frank Schneider

Welcome to "Who is St. John the Baptist," a series of reflections about our parish patron saint written by our pastor, Fr. Frank. This is part of our preparation for the parish 100th anniversary in 2022.

The bulletin series will be here on the parish website. As a new installment is added, it will appear on the following page. The previous installments will follow afterwards.

Please check the website for additional materials: St. John the Baptist as he is depicted in sacred art, books about our patron saint, places dedicated to St. John, etc.

If you have any comments or questions,
please email Fr. Frank at
pastor@sjbwr.org.

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25. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: Church of St. John the Baptist, Jerusalem(5/30/21)

The walled "Old City" of Jerusalem is divided into four "Quarters." The Greek Orthodox Church of St. John the Baptist is a short walk from the Jaffa Gate and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

It is a small church, built after the year 1000 A.D. The original church has sunk about 10 feet below street level. It was first used as a hospice for pilgrims, and later as a hospital for the injured Crusaders during the siege of Jerusalem (1099). Here began one of the medieval order of knights, the Order of Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, also called the "Knights Hospitaller". (Today this tradition is carried on by the Order of Malta.)

The present-day church is Greek Orthodox. There is a tradition that it once held the relic of the head of St. John. However, this is no longer the case. (For a later chapter of our series we may look at the *two* heads of the saint now in the city of Rome.)

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26. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: Church of St. John the Baptist, Madaba, Jordan (6/6/21)

The "Holy Land" is not contained by the borders of the modern countries created after World War I and World War II. The Ancient World during the time of Jesus had a different landscape. One of the countries included in this "ancient map" of the holy places includes the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on the east side of the Jordan River valley. The city of Madaba, near to the modern capital city of Amman, is a Christian city that is filled with churches and famous mosaics from the Byzantine period. Close by is Mount Nebo, the place where Moses was shown the Promised Land before he died. St. John the Baptist is venerated at the Shrine church of St. John the Baptist in Madaba. This Roman Catholic Church was built in the 20th century and has been designated by the Vatican as a place of pilgrimage in honor of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist.

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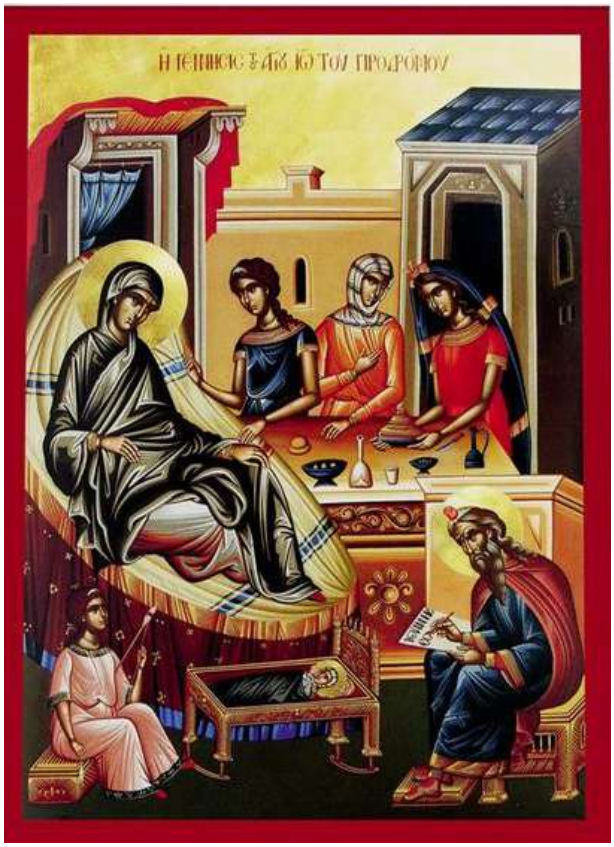
28. Nativity of St. John the Baptist: June 24th: (6/20/21)

This Thursday we celebrate the Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, a very ancient feastday in the church. Usually the feastday of a saint is on the day they died, their "birthday in heaven," but John (and the Blessed Mother), have feastdays on their birthdays. Because John is the Forerunner of the Messiah, his birth is celebrated six months before Christmas Eve. In the old Roman calendar, like the Nativity of the Lord, there were separate Masses for the Vigil, Mass at Dawn, and Mass during the Day. In the new Roman Missal of 1970 it is the highest form of a feast called a "solemnity." There is the Gloria, the Creed and three readings.



The feast is celebrated in some places with bonfires, festivals and the "maypole." It begins on "St. John's Eve," June 23rd at sunset. It coincides (in the Western Hemisphere) with the June Solstice, "Midsummer." The herb St. John's Wort, would be collected on this day.

The feast of St. John is the backdrop for music and theater: Mussoursky's Night on Bald Mountain (featured in Disney's *Fantasia)*, Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream and Wagner's Die Meistersinger.

Not only is this feast celebrated by Catholic Christians, but also in the Orthodox Churches, the Lutheran Church and the Anglican (Episcopal) Church.

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24. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: The Baptism of Jesus, Location #2 (5/23/21)

The site of John's baptisms is in the "wilderness" area just north of the Dead Sea where the Jordan River ends.

Today there are two countries in this area, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and the State of Israel. The site on the *western* side of the area, Qasr al-Yahud, is the official name of the site administered by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. Since the Six Day War (1967) it has been closed because it was surrounded by mine fields.

Fifty years later the Franciscans returned to the site — January 2021 (the mine fields are now cleared). The church there is dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

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23.St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: The Baptism of Jesus, Location #1 (5/16/21)

The site of John's baptisms is in the "wilderness" area just north of the Dead Sea where the Jordan River ends.

Today there are two countries in this area, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and the State of Israel. The site on the eastern side of the area, al-Maghtas (Bethany-beyond the Jordan) has been a place of pilgrimage for over 1500 years. It was restored for pilgrims after the 1994 peace treaty. The church at the site is the Greek Orthodox Church of St. John the Baptist.

Next week we will "visit" the newly re-opened baptism site on the western side of the area in the State of Israel

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22. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: The Judean Wilderness (5/9/21)

John the Baptist spend his formative years, the Scriptures tell us, in the desert. This has been understood as the Judean Wilderness, the expanse of desolate hills outside of Jerusalem, stretching down to the Dead Sea. To this day, the Wilderness is not inhabited, except by the Bedouin tribes. The Bedouins live in simple dwellings and subsist on shepherding goats and sheep.

The Judean Wilderness in the early years of Christianity became the home of many monasteries. Over the centuries most have been destroyed. The Monastery of St. George is still clinging to the side of the gorge where the run-off of the spring rains from Jerusalem empties into the Dead Sea.

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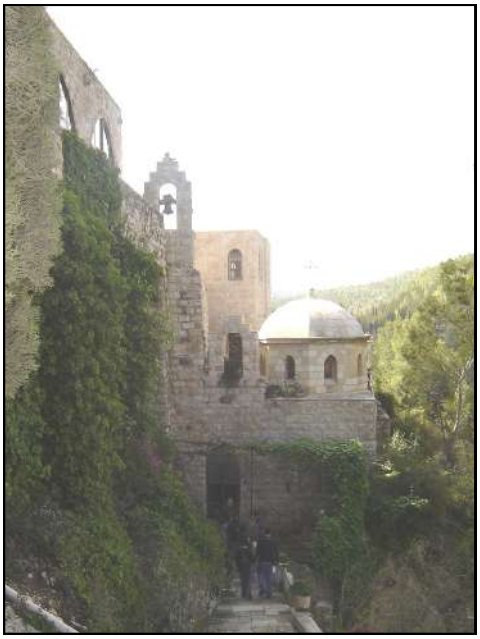
21. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: Monastery of St. John in the Wilderness (5/2/21)

The Scriptures do not tell us much about the child-hood of St. John. Luke says that he "lived in the desert until he appeared pub-licly to Israel.

There are traditions that say that he grew up nearby Ein Kerem and lived a simple life. The current monastery commemorates the "wilderness" in which St. John the Baptist lived as an orphaned child and throughout the years which prepared him for public ministry.



The Franciscan monastery and church were built in 1922 (yes, by our Italian architect of the Holy Land, Antonio Barluzzi).

The monastery has a church which is built next to a small grotto where St. John is said to have lived. The grotto is a small chapel and place of pray-er. There is also a natural spring and the tomb of Elizabeth, the mother of St. John.

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21. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: Church of the Visitation, Ein Kerem (4/25/21)

The village of Ein Kerem, in the "hill country of Judea" not only is the traditional place of the birth of John the Baptist, but the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The Church of the Visitation is a steep walk up the hillside and overlooks the valley.

This church is the "second home" for the family, as it is cooler in the summer. It is the traditional place for the months of Elizabeth's "seclusion." This church was built in 1955 again designed by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi.

The church is filled with frescoes from the gospels.

In the lower church there is a niche where the well of St. Elizabeth is venerated. Like the Church of St. John the Baptist, the outside gallery is decorated with large tiles of the Magnificat, the canticle prayed by Mary: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord." There are currently over 50 languages represented, and more are added each year.

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20. St. John the Baptist in the Holy Land: Ein Kerem(4/18/21)

The gospel of Luke tells us that Elizabeth was visited by Mary who "proceeded in haste to the hill country of Judea." The traditional pilgrimage place for the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah and the birthplace of John the Baptist is the village of Ein Kerem.

Jerusalem is in Judea (the land given to the tribe of Judah). The city is at a high elevation (remember that Jesus says "Let us go up to Jerusalem," indicating the climb to the holy city. Around Jerusalem is indeed "hill country." To the west of the Old City is sprawling "new" city of Jerusalem in the modern State of Israel. Just past Mount Herzl the small village of Ein Kerem sits in a quiet valley.

Pilgrims can visit the Church of St. John the Baptist, built over the traditional place of the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The current church was built in 1939 by the architect Antonio Barluzzi, who designed many of the churches pilgrims now visit. (Back in the 1100's the Crusaders built a church there, but it was destroyed centuries ago.)

The inside of the church is decorated with beautiful blue Spanish tiles — given by the Spanish royal family when the church was built. At the front of the church, to the left of the sanctuary, is a crypt-like niche. Under the small altar is a star which indicates where John was born. Pilgrims can kneel in front of this altar and place their hand on the star.

Outside the church in the courtyard are large porcelain tiles with the "Canticle of Zechariah" in many languages. This is the hymn prayed by Zechariah when he was freed from his silence at the naming of "John," as the angel had prophesied.

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19. "Iconography" of St. John the Baptist (4/11/21)

We can take a break from the Scriptures and examine how St. John has been depicted in sacred art. The "icon" is a sacred image found most often in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches of the East. The icon is more than an "image" or a "picture" and involves prayer and fasting by the artist who creates it.

In many of the icons, John is pictured with "wings." Remember that the Greek for angel means "messenger," and John is the Great Messenger, the Forerunner, who prepares the way of the Lord. (interestingly, the Archangels are pictured with wings, but there is no mention of this in the Scriptures.)

In this particular icon, John is holding a small chalice and pointing to the Christ Child. The chalice reminds us of the Last Supper, the chalice of the Blood that is poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. The Child is holding a white garment, a symbol of the Resurrection and his triumph over sin and death.

Some icons picture John the Baptist with a lamb — John proclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Other icons include (either John is holding the head, or it is near the bottom of the icon), the head of John the Baptist, indicating his beheading by Herod Antipas.

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18. Recap and Look Ahead (Easter, 4/4/21)

We began our St. John the Baptist Patron Saint series over four months ago as the season of Advent opened. This year we are preparing for our One Hundredth Parish Anniversary, culminating in June, 2022. We call on our patron saint to guide our parish family and are invited to use these months to learn more about St. John the Baptist.

Each week we have taken a small section of Sacred Scripture and perhaps have discovered more about St. John than we might have taken for granted. The past seventeen (17) installments are on the parish website under "100th Anniversary."

Part of our Jubilee Year will be a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the steps of Jesus and John the Baptist. Both Jesus and John lived their entire lives in this small part of the world! We depart on March 28, 2022. The pilgrimage includes Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Mount Tabor (Transfiguration).

We will also visit the sites associated with John the Baptist:

- Ein Kerem: In the "hill country of Judea," which is the traditional site of the birth of St. John the Baptist and the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth
- Monastery of St. John the Baptist: an ancient site that venerates the hidden years of St. John's childhood.
- The Judean Wilderness: Just west of Jerusalem on the way down to the city of Jericho, where John spent the years of his ministry.
- Baptism Site: The most ancient site is just north of the Dead Sea on the Jordanian side of the River Jordan.
- The Church of St. John the Baptist, Madaba, Jordan: Shrine church nearby the baptism site and north of Machaerus.
- The Fortress of Machaerus: Built by King Herod the Great and later the palace of Herod Antipas who executed St. John. The "lower town" is where John was imprisoned and executed.

The pilgrimage begins in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (we fly into Amman, Jordan), and we cross the frontier into the State of Israel at Eilat. We will stay on the Sea of Galilee and in Jerusalem as well. We return to JFK from Ben Gurion Airport in TelAviv.

The pilgrimage is a year away and all are welcome. Please check out the full itinerary on the parish website, and feel free to email Fr. Frank with any questions. (Father Frank has led many pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and visited eighteen times over the past years.)

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17. The "Golgotha" of John the Baptist (3/28/21)

We begin Holy Week and prepare for the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And we can also connect this to the fate of our patron saint. We know the place of the martyrdom of John the Baptist – the fortress palace of Herod Antipas called Machaerus.

King Herod was a great builder. He rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem (it was destroyed in 70 A.D. and only some foundation stones are standing, now called the "Wailing Wall." He built a tomb for the Patriarchs: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca and Jacob. It is still standing in Hebron, now in the occupied West Bank in Palestine. Herod the Great also built the palace outside of Jerusalem, the "Herodion" (where Herod's tomb was only recently discovered) and the fortress of "Masada" south of Jerusalem on the Dead Sea. Another magnificent summer palace/fortress was built across the Dead Sea in which is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Machaerus. After the death of Herod (who had ten wives) and his son also named Herod, King Herod Antipas inherited the fortress and made it the basis of operations.

It is *this* Herod whom Jesus calls "sly" and whom John the Baptist chastised because of his second marriage to Herodias. Herod Antipas had John arrested and imprisoned at Machaerus.

The palace is perched on a large hill that overlooks the Dead Sea. It affords expansive views, and smoke signals can be seen from Jerusalem on the other side of the Dead Sea. John would have been imprisoned and executed in the "lower town" beneath the fortress. (Remember that John the Baptist entertained visitors while he was in prison and sent emissaries from there to question Jesus about his ministry.)

John's execution is seen as part of the long line of prophets sent by God, whose sinful people often rejected them. Sometimes the prophets, like John, were martyred. At the time of John the Baptist and Jesus the veneration of martyred prophets like Jeremiah grew, including adornment and veneration of their tombs (some can be seen today in the Kidron Valley outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem).

It is clear that the martyrdom of John the Baptist deeply affected Jesus. John's violent death indicates that death is a real possibility for Jesus. "When Jesus heard the news about John, he left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself" (Mt 14:13). "When Jesus heard the news about John, he left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself" (Mt 17:11-13, words spoken after the Transfiguration as they were coming down the mountain).

In a sense, Machaerus is the "Golgotha," the hill of John's Calvary. From Machaerus Jerusalem, the place of the future death of Jesus can be seen. John and Jesus are linked throughout the ministry of Jesus, and in their deaths.

[Note: Machaerus is part of the itinerary of our Holy Land Pilgrimage in March, 2022.]

Question for Reflection: *Am I ready to enter Holy Week, and prepare the way for the death and resurrection of the Lord?*

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16. "What then should we do?" (3/21/21)

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." Soldiers also asked him, "And what is it that we should do?" He told them, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages." (Lk 3: 10-14)

The gospel of Luke is the only gospel that gives us a taste of the teachings of John the Baptist. He describes a typical scene for a preacher/teacher, with various groups approaching him with their questions. There is no doubt that John gave advice to those who came to him for baptism – and then returned to their regular lives.

First, we can notice that John is given titles that were also given to Jesus: "Rabbi," ("Teacher"). Second, it is no surprise that his teaching is similar to the teaching of Jesus. Both announced the coming Kingdom of God that requires an upright way of life. We can look at the three teachings briefly:

Sharing clothing and food: These are "corporeal works of mercy" found in the gospel teachings of Jesus. "If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well" (Mt 5:40, part of the Sermon on the Mount, also Lk 6: 29). "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35), as well as the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (in all four gospels).

Advice to the tax collectors: While John the Baptist advised being honest at what was collected, Zacchaeus goes far beyond this: "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (Lk 19:8). Moreover, Jesus is known for his outreach to the tax collectors, who felt drawn to him (some examples: Mk 2:15-17, dinner at the house of Levi, he is a "friend of tax collectors" Mt 11:18; call of Matthew, Mt 9:7-11; parable of the tax collector at prayer, Lk 18-9-14).

Advice to soldiers: John is specific about extortion, false accusations and extortion, indicating some of the shadier practices of the military occupation of Palestine. While Jesus is not recorded as giving advice to the military, the cure of the centurion servant (Mt 8:5ff, Lk 4:46ff)

Next week we will look at John the Baptist's teachings on fasting and prayer.

Question for Reflection: *As part of my Lenten discipline, how am I practicing the corporal works of mercy?*

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15. Jesus the "Lamb of God" (3/14/21)

When we returned to "Ordinary Time" after the Christmas season, we listened to the gospel of John and the call of the first disciples (John 1 :35ff). John points out Jesus to his disciples, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God!" In our patron saint series we reflected on John's unique use of this title of Jesus in the gospels and how it deepens our understanding of who Jesus is.

This past Sunday's gospel is again from the gospel of John, just one chapter later. The Cleansing of the Temple (John 2: 15ff) occurs in the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus. (Most of us think of the Cleansing of the Temple the day after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem during the first "holy week." This is in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The gospel of John is different.) Jesus has begun his ministry and called his first disciples (John 1) and performed the first of the seven Great Signs (miracles) at the wedding of Cana (John 2). Now he journeys up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and enters the temple area.

While we usually think of his "cleansing" the temple to make it more of a "house of prayer," let's remember that the acts of Jesus all have many levels of symbolic meaning. In John's gospel it clearly states it was "the time of Passover" and so people came to purchase their Passover lamb. The lambs were slaughtered by the priests later in the week and distributed so that the Seder meal could be celebrated in their homes.

Jesus clears the temple of all the buying and selling, including at this time of year the Passover lambs. His words "I shall destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days" clearly means "he was referring to his body." Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Paschal Lamb who is sacrificed to save us from the slavery of sin and the powers of death, has no further need of the ritual lambs for the Passover meal. He himself is the Lamb who will be slain. He himself is the new Temple where God abides in love for his people. Jesus is the Son of the loving Father who has given us his only-begotten son because he so loves the world.

John the Baptist has given Jesus this title which helps us understand the ministry of Jesus from the very beginning. In John's gospel there are six more great "Signs," culminating in the death and resurrection. On the cross we "behold the Lamb of God" who takes away the sins of the world. We are reminded that as followers of the Lamb we, too, are to give up our lives in love and service of our neighbor. Like the Lamb it is in "dying that we are reborn to Eternal Life." Indeed, John the Baptist will himself become a "lamb of sacrifice" when he is beheaded by Herod at the fortress of Machaerus.

Question for Reflection: *This Lent, how am I denying myself so that I can follow the Lamb, wherever he goes?*

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14. They were baptized by him (3/7/21)

During the forty days of Lent through prayer, fasting and almsgiving we repent of our sins and prepare to renew the promises made at baptism. The highlight of Easter is the reception of baptism by the catechumens and then our own renewal of baptism promises. How does the baptism of St. John the Baptist compare with our Christian celebration of the sacrament? Are they the same? Similar? Or radically different?

Without a doubt, the rite performed by John was the most striking feature of his ministry. This is why the title "Baptizer" or "Baptist" is given to him during the time of his ministry and by Christians to this very day. When we look for the details of his ritual of baptism, there are not many.

There are references to where he baptized: the Jordan and at the springs of "Aenon near Salim."

The baptism was performed out in the open.

It took place "in" the river, in running water.

The word used in Scripture refers to "bathing" or "dipping."

The entire body was immersed in water (not just a pouring over the head).

There are no words spoken by John when he baptized, at least no formula is recorded in the Scripture.

As people were baptized, "they confessed their sins."

The ritual was performed only once. People then returned to their daily lives.

The meaning of John's baptism is also gathered from sparse information:

John compares his baptism of water with the baptism with the Spirit and with fire (Mk 1:18, Mt 3:11, Lk 3:16).

John preaches a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (This is only found in Mk 1:4, and is omitted in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.)

The baptism was a cleansing of the entire body, just as the heart was cleansed by repentance and righteous conduct (see Lk 3).

Although John had his group of disciples (we will look at this group in our next installment), his baptism was not the initiation into a "church" or a stable group of followers.

So where does the evidence leave us? John's baptism is a sign of readiness for the coming judgement of God. It is a unique ritual in the ancient world and is the hallmark of John's ministry. However, it is diferent from our Christian understanding of the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is our initiation into the family of the Church, a configuration to Jesus the priest, prophet and king, a remission from all sin. Most of all we are immersed in the death of Christ, and we rise with Christ to new life.

John was always clear about his ministry and his part of God's plan. Someone is coming after him who is greater. He is unworthy to untie his sandal straps. He will baptize with the Spirit. The gospel of John is even stronger: John proclaims the Lamb of God and rejoices to hear the voice of the bridegroom.

Question for reflection for the week: *Do I understand the power of the sacrament of baptism in my life,*

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13. "Repent and Believe" (2/21/21)

The season of Lent is our annual "journey into the desert" as we prepare for the Paschal Mystery at the end of the forty days. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Vatican II) describes the "twofold character" of the Lenten Season:

> The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery (#109).

St. John the Baptist is the Desert Prophet who preaches these two Lenten themes: repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and baptism as a sign of conversion and new life. Just as we can call Advent "the season of John the Baptist," so we may indeed see Lent as embracing John's two great themes.

The gospel of the First Sunday of Lent begins with the gospel story of Jesus in the desert and the temptations. John has been arrested and now Jesus enters the main stage of the gospel. This year we read the very brief passage from St. Mark's gospel – the terse statement Jesus was tempted (while Matthew and Luke elaborate on the three temptations), and then the preaching of Jesus:

> "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

We notice how similar the preaching of Jesus is to the words spoken by John the Baptist:

- Matthew 3:1 "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
- Luke 3: 3 ..proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- Mark 1:1,4: …the gospel of Jesus Christ…proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

During this season of Lent, we are invited to take a good look at ourselves and notice our sinfulness. Many will celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lent and receive forgiveness for their sins through sacramental absolution. The culmination of the season is the Easter Vigil when adults are baptized, and the whole Church renews the promises made at our baptism. We are sprinkled with the Easter water, the waters of Baptism.

Yes, John the Baptist is very much present with us as we begin the season of Lent.

Question for reflection for the week: *How will I use this Lent as a time for repentance and preparation to renew my baptismal promises?*

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12. "Thrown into the fire" 2/14/21)

The four gospels have few details about the actual preaching of John the Baptist. There are no parables, no beatitudes, no long discourses. Matthew and Luke, however, have passages with almost identical words of John, probably copied from an earlier source that is now lost (and not known to Mark or John).

We have already looked at three of the metaphors for God's judgement: brood of vipers, winnowing fan, and the ax laid to the root of the trees. Now we look at the "fire" of God's judgment for all three:

> Who warned you [vipers] to flee from the *coming wrath*…The tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the *fire*…the chaff he will burn with *unquenchable fire* (Mt 3:8, 10, 12 and Lk 3: 7, 9, 17).

John is certainly part of the long tradition of "punishment by fire" in the prophets.

Amos 7:4: God calls for a judgement by fire.

Ezekiel 38:22: the Lord sends down rains and hailstones, fire and brimstone

Malachi 4:1: the day comes burning like an oven…the day shall burn them up.

Additionally, John speaks of the one coming after him who "will baptize you with the holy Spirit and *fire*" (Mt 3:11 and Lk 3: 16).

While John baptized people in the waters of the River Jordan, the Coming One will immerse the wicked in a river of fire. For John, this fiery judgment comes only after the good are separated from the evildoers (good trees with fruit from bad, wheat from the chaff). This is the only place in the New Testament that refers to a "Baptism of Fire," and it seems that it is to be contrasted with the "Baptism in the Holy spirit." God will pour out his Spirit, just as prophesied by Joel 2:28, Ez 39:29 and Is 32:15.

The Spirit is not a destructive force (reserved for the wicked), but pours out blessings and peace. This is part of the imagery of the prophet Ezekiel 36:25-27:

> I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statues, careful to observe my decrees.

Reflection Question for the week: *What in my life might need to be "burnt away"?*

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11. "Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees." 2/7/21)

The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain more details about the preaching of John the Baptist. We have looked at John's metaphors of the brood of vipers, the winnowing fan, and this week the "ax" ready to cut down the trees:

Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Mt 3: 10 and Lk 3:9).

John again draws from his experience, as trees would have grown in the wilderness near the Jordan River, and would have been harvested for construction in nearby Jerusalem.

> The guild prophets said to Elisha, "There is not enough room for us to continue to live here with you. Let us go to the Jordan, where by getting one beam apiece we can build ourselves a place to live." "Go," Elisha said. "Please agree to accompany your servants," one of them requested," "Yes, I will come," he replied. So he went with them, and when they arrived at the Jordan they began to fell trees (2 Kings 6: 1-4).

The cutting down of a tree is a symbol of judgment for the prophets:

> Behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, lops off the boughs with terrible violence; the tall of stature are felled, and the lofty ones brought low; the forest thickets are felled with the axe…(Is 10:33-34)

Jesus also uses this image in the parable of the barren fig tree:

> And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. [So] cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"(Lk 13:6-9)

We see yet another example where the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus "overlap."

Reflection Question for the week: *Where are the "good fruits" that I am producing on my life now?*

WHO IS ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST?

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10. "His winnowing fan is in his hand." (1/31/21)

Last week we reflected on John the Baptist calling the Pharisees a "brood of vipers." In both Matthew and Luke's gospel is also the image of the one who is coming after John as part of the imminent judgement of God:

"His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:12 and Lk 3:17).

John's metaphor is a familiar one to his listeners: threshing and winnowing. The sheaves of wheat were brought to a "threshing floor" and the wheat was separated from the stalks usually by an ox-drawn sledge. The threshed grain is now broken straw and chaff which needed to be further sifted. The straw and chaff were thrown up into the air with a winnowing fork: the heavier grain fell to the floor again but the lighter straw and chaff were blown away by the wind (winnowed).

The prophet Isaiah (41: 15-16) described the mysterious "servant" of God as threshing and winnowing:

> "I will make of you a threshing sledge,
> sharp, new and doubled-edged,
> To thresh the mountains and crush them,
> to make the hills like chaff.
> When you winnow them, the wind shall carry them off,
> but the storm shall scatter them.
> But you shall rejoice in the Lord, and glory in the Holy One of Israel."

The wicked are frequently referred to as "chaff":

- Ps 1:4: They are like chaff driven by the wind.
- Ps 35:5: Make them like chaff before the wind.
- Job 21:18: Let them be like straw before the wind, and like chaff which the storm snatches away!
- Is 17:13: But God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far away; windswept, like chaff on the mountains.
- Hos 13:3: Like chaff storm-driven from the threshing floor.

Next week will look at the third image used by John the Baptist in his preaching: the tree cut down at the roots.

Reflection Question : *Where is the "chaff" in my life that God may be calling me to surrender*?

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9. "You brood of vipers." (1/24/21)

John the Baptist was a strong and direct preacher, beyond a doubt. The gospels of Matthew (3:7) and Luke (3:7) preserve the powerful imagery used by John to spur his listeners on to repentance for their sins and readiness for the judgement of God soon to come.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to feel from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance."

The Pharisees and Sadducees are called a family ("brood") of deadly snakes. We can imagine the wilderness area where John preached and baptized – just north of the Dead Sea where the Jordan River empties into the sea. Around the river is (to this day) wasteland of shrub and grasses, still uninhabited. John conjures the image of a wilderness wildfire. Such fires flare up, can spread for miles and destroyseverything in their path. Animals, including scorpions and "vipers" (snakes) scurry through the flames to avoid death as the fire spreads and rages.

John uses "fire" as the means of God's judgment, referring to the prophets who described God's judgment as a fire: Malachi 3:1, "refiner's fire". (We will look at this again next week when we talk about the "winnowing fan.")

Interestingly, Jesus uses the same phrase in his own ministry – another reminder that Jesus was, at least for a short time, a disciple of John. Jesus could well have picked up some of John's preaching style and his images.

> "You brood of vipers, how can you say good things when you are evil? For from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks." (Mt 12:34)

Even more reminiscent of John the Baptist's condemnation is another use of the same term by Jesus: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how can you flee from the judgement of Gehenna?" (Mt 23:33)

"Gehenna" was the valley just outside the walls of Jerusalem where the city trash was dumped and burned. Jesus also preached the coming judgement of God, but he will take this "wrath" upon himself and bring it to the Cross on our behalf.

"Brood of vipers" is a strong image, for certain. John's preaching was consistently forceful and clear: God's judgment is coming and don't get caught in its "fire." You have nowhere to run!

Reflection Question for the week: *What are the obstacles in my life that blind me from seeing myself as God sees me?*

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8. "Behold the Lamb of God" (1/17/21)

We return to the "ordinary time" of the Church Year this weekend and listen to the gospel of John where we once again meet our patron saint, John the Baptist. This gospel will continue to give us fresh insights into John's ministry, his followers, and his relationship to Jesus.

The first disciples of Jesus, John's gospel tells us, were firstly disciples of John the Baptist who "converted" to disciples of Jesus. (Later in our series we will look at Acts of the Apostles where there are more of Baptist Disciples who become Christians of the early Church.) One of the two disciples is named, and Andrew seeks out his brother Simon with the exclamation "We have found the Messiah!"

Andrew and Simon become followers of Jesus who invites them: "Come and see."

Did you notice that the call of the disciples in this gospel is different from the other three gospels? There is no mention in the gospel of John of the seashore, casting nets and being interrupted by Jesus, leaving the fisherman-father. John's gospel shows us the deep connection between the ministry of John the Baptist and the new ministry of Jesus. (Later in John's gospel as we will see, both groups of disciples are baptizing nearby each other.)

This gospel stresses John as the *witness* to Jesus, and downplays the baptism.

In fact, this gospel does not state that John baptized Jesus. The witness of John is powerful: Behold the Lamb of God. John the Baptist's title is one that Christians have used for two thousand years. We repeat the title during the Communion Rite; John's words are quoted to the congregation at Mass as the priest holds up the Host: "Behold the Lamb of God!"

We recall the deep repercussions for calling Jesus the "Lamb": The Passover Lamb is slaughtered and the blood marks the doorposts so that God's Chosen People will be saved from the Death, the final plague in Egypt. In John's gospel the crucifixion takes place on the afternoon before Passover at precisely the time when the Seder lambs are slaughtered in preparation for the Passover. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose blood is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins. And John the Baptist recognized this deep mystery "as he was walking along and saw Jesus."

Reflection Question for the week: *When are the times in my life when I have felt the call to be a disciple of Jesus in a new way?*

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7. "And he was baptized in the Jordan by John" (1/10/21)

Today we complete the Christmas Season with the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus. Most of us understand the Baptism as the highpoint of John's ministry, and the launching of Jesus into his ministry of about three years. While it is certain that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, only the gospels of Mark and Matthew actually tell us that John baptized Jesus. Why is this the case?

The gospels each make it clear that Jesus far surpasses John the Baptist. The baptism in no way give John any superiority or precedence. Remember that there were Baptist Disciples during the ministry of Jesus (Andrew and Peter left the Baptist and followed Jesus) and also after the Resurrection (the Acts of the Apostles tell us of various conversions). John and his disciples baptized and also Jesus and his disciples baptized (we will talk about John 3 later in this series). Mark stresses John's insistence of his unworthiness. Matthew adds to this John's exclamation as he falls to his knees, "*You* should be the one baptizing *me*!" Luke goes further and tells us John is imprisoned and only *later* "Jesus is baptized." Finally, the gospel of John leaves out the baptism altogether, just an illusion at best, and adds John the Baptist's wonderful words "He must increase and I must decrease!"

What does the baptism of John mean? First, John's ministry of baptizing is unique at the time. While other Jewish sects (the Essenes at Qumran) would have ritual washing throughout the day, John's baptism is a once-for-all ritual, indicating that the person repented of their sins and was ready to welcome God's kingdom. Remember that John gave no specific indication of a coming Messiah; his preaching is about the judgement of God as foretold by the prophets. John only talks about "one stronger than I is coming" and his own "unworthiness to unfasten his sandal strap."

Second, after the baptism ritual, the baptized person returned from the Jordan River and re-entered his regular life – back to nearby Jerusalem or to their hometowns. The gospels are silent whether Jesus stayed with John a little while longer as a temporary disciple. The four gospels all indicate that Jesus spent preparation time in the desert before beginning his itinerant years of ministry.

Reflection Question for the week: *Do I remember the <u>date</u> when I was baptized?*

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6. "And she gave birth to a son" (1/3/21)

We have already seen that the gospel of Luke has parallel scenes for John and Jesus in chapters 1 and 2: two annunciations and two nativities. The Church takes up Luke's cue and has only two liturgical celebrations (solemnities which are the most important type of feastday) of nativities: Christmas on December 25 and the Nativity of John the Baptist on June 24.

The birth of John the Baptist is quite different from that of Jesus. We can look a little more closely and notice the details.

Elizabeth gives birth in her home with her neighbors nearby. They learn that "the Lord had extended his mercy" to their elderly neighbor and rejoice. Luke seems to indicate that Elizabeth did not announce her pregnancy. Thus, only her cousin Mary shares the secret that she is with child.

The time for circumcision arrives (usually after eight days) and the neighbors assemble for the ritual celebration. Although it is uncertain whether "naming" happened at this time in first century Palestine, Luke tells us that they presumed he would be named after his father. (The custom at this time was more likely to name the child after the grandfather.) Elizabeth intervenes: "No, he is to be called John."

Interestingly, Zechariah has been mute, unable to speak, since the annunciation of Gabriel. There is no indication that he "had a chat" with his wife about the name, and there is no record of an annunciation to Elizabeth like that of Mary.

Now the neighbors "using signs" question the father. Here we discover that Zechariah was not only mute, but apparently was also deaf after his annunciation. The dramatic moment arrives when Zechariah asks for a writing tablet to let them know "His name is *John*."

"Fear descended" on the neighborhood and the whole region – both mother and father somehow agree on the name "John." Along with the crowd, we also marvel at how God is at work in John the Baptist from his conception, his birth, and soon his ministry in the desert.

But first, Zechariah, now able to speak, proclaims the wonder of God is his canticle "("song") called the "Benedictus": *Blessed be* the Lord the God of Israel.. More on the Benedictus later in our series.

Reflection Question for the week: *As this new year begins, where in my life do I discover God's hand at work?*

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5. "The baby leapt in my womb for joy" (12/27/20)

The gospel of Luke parallels the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus in the first 2 chapters of the gospel. The poignant story of the meeting of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, the Visitation (Lk 2: 39-66) tells us much about how Luke depicts the role of St. John as the one who prepares the way for the Lord.

Immediately after her annunciation from the angel Gabriel, Mary "proceeds in haste" to be with her cousin during the last months of her pregnancy. (Elizabeth is already "in her sixth month" and Mary stays "three months" – she leaves before John is born. The length of pregnancy is computed in *lunar* months at this time – ten months.)

The emotional meeting of Mary and Elizabeth culminates in John leaping "for joy" in Elizabeth's womb. In Luke's gospel there are two important points to notice. First, John witnesses to Jesus *before* his birth. Luke tells us the unborn John leaps "for joy" – and there is never another mention of joy in John's ministry in Luke's gospel. (Only John's gospel tells us that John "rejoices" in the bridegroom while they both are baptizing at the Jordan River, Jn 3:29.)

Second, this is the *only time John and Jesus meet* in Luke's gospel. Lk 3:19-20: John is imprisoned; Lk 3:21, Jesus is at prayer "after likewise being baptized." Luke has John the Baptist "off the scene" and clears the way to focus on Jesus as he commences his own ministry with the baptism.

The family relationship of John and Jesus as "cousins" also is a question when we read that John while in prison sends emissaries to Jesus and asks "Are you the one who is to come or do we look for another?" (Lk 7:19). If they are related, if John witnesses to the Messiah even in the womb, why does he ask the question at all?

As we continue to examine our patron saint in the gospels, we see four different depictions with their separate purposes. Probably the family relationship of John and Jesus is included by Luke (and no other gospel) to show the "family relationship" between John's disciples and Jesus' disciples. Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, where he tells us that John's disciples were still around well after the Resurrection and Ascension (more of that later in our series).

Reflection Question for the week: *Where in my life do I discover* joy *in my belief in Jesus?*

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4. "And you shall name him John" (12/20/20)

The gospel of the fourth Sunday of Advent this year is the Annunciation, only found in the gospel of Luke. Luke's gospel has already given us another Annunciation story – the visitation of the angel Gabriel to announce the birth of John the Baptist. (Remember that there are two Nativity stories in this gospel: the birth of John and the birth of Jesus. Also, there is a *third* annunciation in the gospel of Luke, the appearance of the angel to the shepherds.

The three annunciations have similarities. The angel(s) appears suddenly. The appearance causes fear. The messenger of God (literally, "angel") gives good news.

Gabriel appears to Zechariah, who is one of the priests who take turns serving in the Temple of Jerusalem. (We usually think of the angel appearing to Mary while she is praying, but Luke does not say anything about this – it is Zechariah who is serving and praying in the Temple.) He is "advanced in years" – no age is given. In both annunciations God must intervene so that a child can be born. Both children are primarily the works of the power of God.

Zechariah is told "your prayer is heard" – this is implied earlier when Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as "righteous" yet "without child." Mary is a young virgin, open to God's will – again, the child is gracious gift of God.

"You will call him John." The name "Yehohanan" or "Yohanan" was not an uncommon name at the time. It means "Yahweh has given grace." Mary is told "…and you shall name him Jesus" ("Yeshua" means "Yahweh saves"). The angel tells Zechariah that the child will be "filled with the Holy Spirit," soon proven when the child leaps in the womb of Elizabeth. Mary is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon *her,* while her son will be "great," called "Son of the Most High" and "rule over" God's people.

The most striking difference, of course, is that Zechariah is overcome with fear, cannot speak, and is mute until the naming of his son. Mary is able to speak: "let it be done to me according to your word."

Question for reflection for the week: *Where do I feel afraid in my life now and how can I see God working his power there?*

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3. "I am the Voice" (12/13/20)

This year's gospel for the Third Sunday of Advent introduces us to St. John the Baptist as portrayed in the gospel of John. This gives us the opportunity to notice that each gospel, while there are agreements about our patron saint, has its own "take" on the Baptist.

The first part of John's gospel is the called the "Prologue." We hear that the "Word was with God and the Word was God." This gospel proclaims that Jesus has existed for all eternity, and has been sent by the Father to bring light into our darkness.

It is astonishing that the gospel introduces our patron saint, John, into this magnificent Prologue! Nothing about John needed to be added here. It could have waited until the gospel talks about the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus and his baptism! Why does this gospel insert John into the Prologue?

In John's gospel, John is the first *witness* to Jesus, not the "one who goes before the Lord to prepare his way." John calls himself "the voice," and not the "light" — the other gospels quote the prophet Isaiah *about* John, but in John's gospel, John himself quotes Isaiah about himself!

Because John is most of all the *witness*, this gospel never calls John "the Baptizer." While John does baptize, this gospel sees his baptisms as much less important that his *witnessing* to Jesus. In our gospel passage today, John insists that he is only the "voice" — he is *not* the Christ. He is *not* Elijah. He is *not* the Messiah (the "Christ," the "Anointed One"). Furthermore, John downplays his own baptism. In today's gospel John emphasizes this by saying the "one coming after me " will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This gospel never connects John's baptism with repentance, as in the other three gospels.

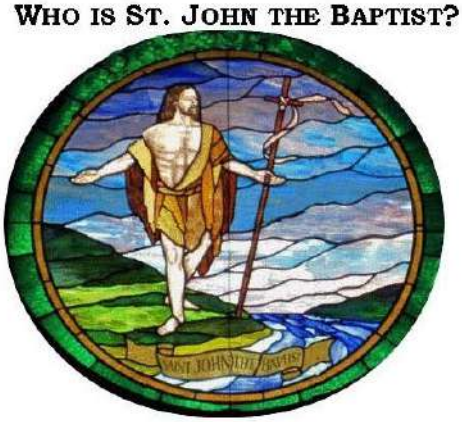
In the gospel of John, our patron saint is the "un-Baptist" because his vocation is not primarily to baptize but to witness to Jesus! "I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel" (Jn 1:31). John tells us Jesus is the "light" (Jn 1:7), the "Lord" (Jn 1:23), the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29), the "Chosen One" (Jn 1:34), the "Bridegroom who must increase while [John] must decrease" (Jn 3:29-30), the one who "ranks ahead of me" because "he existed before me" (Jn 1:15).

We are like John — we are not the light, but those who testify to Jesus by our words and our actions. We are only delegated servants, simple "people" who are human and need the Lamb of God to save us from our sins.

Question for reflection for the week: *Am I aware who I truly am in the eyes of God, like John the Baptist is so clear about who he is — and who he is <u>not</u>?*

2. "A Voice in the Desert" (12/6/20)

WHO IS ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST?



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The season of Advent can be called the "Season of St. John the Baptist," who announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of Mark proclaims the "beginning of the gospel [good news] of Jesus Christ the Son of God" and the voice of the messenger sent ahead of the Lord.

Mark quotes "Isaiah the prophet" (actually Mark quotes Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1) who writes of the voice of one crying out in the *desert*. Mark does not tell us much about John's preaching or activity, but lets us know about his being in the desert and his strange clothing. (We will discuss John's food and diet at another time.)

Why the desert? And how could John be baptizing in the Jordan River and at the same time be in the desert?

The geography of the Holy Land helps us understand this seeming contradiction. Outside the city of Jerusalem the Judean Wilderness reaches east down to the Dead Sea. This wilderness contains the area at the north of the Dead Sea where the Jordan River empties. It was not inhabited, not used for farming, and contained flowing water. It is here that John travelled and preached, alluding to the wilderness and wandering of people lost in their sins, and baptizing them as a sign of their change of heart in the waters of the Jordan.

Today it is this area that pilgrims visit on either side of the southern end of the Jordan River. To the east is an ancient pilgrimage site now in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Across the river is the newly re-opened baptism site in the State of Israel. It is indeed a desert, a wilderness, and with flowing water and plants at the river banks. ("What did you go out to see? A reed swaying in the wind?"

At the time of John's and Jesus' ministries a desert existence was actually being lived by some Jewish people who awaited the New Temple and Prophet (the Essenes at Qumran near the Dead Sea.) The desert is a strong image that reminds John's followers and ourselves about the power of God manifested in the desert. The Chosen People wandered in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land. The prophets speak about the desert becoming a place of new life and abundance (see especially Isaiah 35:1-10).

Isaiah's prophecy is now fulfilled in the wilderness, in the person of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah.

Question for reflection for the week: *When have I been in the wilderness/desert and been able to hear God announcing Good News coming back into my life?*

1. "His name is John." (11/29/20)

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First in the Centennial Series on our Patron Saint

The Catholic mission church in Wading River began in 1912 and was dedicated to St. John the Baptist – no doubt because of the proximity to Long Island Sound. The mission was raised to the status of parish in 1922, and for nearly one hundred years we have followed the example of our parish patron saint. We announce the Good News of the Gospel, invite all people to renewal and conversion, and we baptize to bring countless people into the new life of Christ.

As we prepare for our 100th anniversary, I invite you to reacquaint yourself with our patron saint, and pray for his guidance and intercession for our parish family of St. John the Baptist. What better time to begin our journey than Advent, the "season of John the Baptist" as we again prepare for the coming of the Lord at Christmas and at the end of time?

Most of us are familiar with the general outline of John's life and his preaching as found in the four gospels. What more is there to know? Wasn't he the cousin of Jesus? Didn't he preach in the desert to "prepare the way of the Lord"? Didn't he baptize Jesus and call him the "Lamb of God"? And wasn't he beheaded by King Herod after the dance of Salome's daughter? What else could there be to learn?

The four gospels, while they agree on the general outline, offer conflicting stories and details about John. What do the four gospel "portraits" of John have to tell us today? Besides being baptized, what was the deeper relationship of Jesus with the Baptizer? Why does one gospel say that Jesus was John's cousin and the other gospels never connect them as family members? Why does Jesus mention John the Baptist throughout his three years of ministry? Did Jesus baptize like John did? What did Jesus think of the execution of John the Baptist? What happened to the Baptist's disciples after his execution? Why were there stories that John was "raised from the dead"?

Next week, the Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the beginning of Mark's gospel and the introduction of John the Baptist into salvation history. We'll begin with Mark, and on the 3rd Sunday we hear from John's Gospel. I invite you to keep an open mind, and perhaps to have a new "meeting" with our parish patron saint. Together we can listen to the stories of John and discover how we can follow his example and be courageous and strong voices to announce Jesus, the Word of God to our world.

Question for reflection for the week: *Do I ever think of John the Baptist inspiring and watching over our parish family or our patron saint?*