



PART 4: WHY WE NEED JOHN THE BAPTIST

By Robert MacDonald

Luke 3:1-22

What Do We Lose?

The gospel writers are trying to tell the story of Jesus really well. They're trying to help us understand Jesus' role, his life and ministry, death and resurrection. And all four Gospel writers talk about John the Baptist at the beginning of the story.

What if the Gospel writers had decided to leave him out of the story? What do we lose when we don't know about John the Baptist?

I. We Lose a Prophet

¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. - Luke 1:16-17

Reading about John the Baptist reminded me of my piano teacher circling and underlining on my music pages. The notes are already there but notes on a page aren't music. They need to be played and interpreted well. Sort of like our scriptures.

That's the primary role of a Prophet.

² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. - Luke 3:2

"The word of God came to..." is a phrase that's used many times in scripture when someone begins their ministry as a prophet.

And there are two Old Testament prophets that John should remind us of: Samuel and Elijah (Bonus prophets: Elisha and Nathan).

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What's the Same?

Similarity	John the Baptist	Samuel	Elijah	Elisha	Nathan
Birth	Miraculous Birth (Luke 1:57-66)	Miraculous Birth (1 Sam 1)			
Nazirites (Numbers 6)	Nazirite (Luke 1:15)	Nazirite (1 Sam 1:11)			
Strange eating detail	Eats weird stuff (Matt 3:4, Mark 1:6)		Fed by Ravens (1 Kings 17:2-5)		
Where they live	Lives in the wilderness by the Jordan (Luke 3:3)	Judges at Gilgal (1 Sam 7:16), the place memorializing Israel's Jordan crossing in Joshua 4-5	Lives in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:3-6; 19:3-9)	Lives in Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38)	
Relationship with religious elites	Confronts religious elites (Matt 3:7, Luke 3:7-9)	Confronts High Priest Eli and sons (1 Sam 3:11-19)	Confronts Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-40)		Challenges High Priest Abiathar (1 Kings 1:5-8)
Confronts a king	Confronts king Herod (Luke 3:19-20)	Confronts king Saul (1 Sam 13 & 15)	Confronts king Ahab (1 Kings 18:17-19) and king Ahaziah (2 Kings 1:1-16)	Confronts king Jehoram (2 Kings 3:13-14)	Confronts king David (2 Sam 12)
Anointing	Baptizes Jesus (Luke 3:21)	Anoints Saul and David as kings (1 Sam 9 & 16)	Anoints Elisha as prophet (1 Kings 19:16-21)	Anoints Hazael (2 Kings 8:7-15) and Jehu (2 Kings 9:1-10) as kings	Anoints Solomon as king (1 Kings 1:38-40)
The Jordan River	Baptizes in the Jordan (Luke 3:3)	Anoints Saul and removes Saul's kingship at Gilgal (1 Sam 11 and 15)	Inaugurates Elisha's ministry at the Jordan (2 Kings 2:6-12)	Begins ministry at the Jordan (2 Kings 2:13-15), Namaan cleansed in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:1-14), ministers at Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38)	
Ministers to the outsider	Preaches to tax collectors and soldiers (Luke 3:12-14)		Performs miracles for a widow in Sidon (2 Kings 17:7-24)		
Calls Israel to repentance and renewed faithfulness	Luke 3:3, 11-14	1 Sam 7:2-4	1 Kings 18:21		

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For Samuel, his story culminates in the anointing of David, the king who is held up as an example of faithfulness to God. And Elijah's story ends with the passing on of his ministry to a successor prophet: Elisha. And Elisha ends up having a huge role in the upheaval of Israel's corrupt systems.

What's Different?

One subtle difference is the fusion of these two identities – a *king* maker and a *prophet* maker. Throughout Israel's history, kings and prophets are two different roles. And good kings of Israel, even David, are meant to live in submission to the prophet. Because for Israel, God is king, and the prophet is God's authority-wielding representative.

That's why John says that...

¹⁶ *one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* – Luke 3:16b

The second, and probably most glaringly obvious difference between John and these figures is Baptism.

II. We Lose the Central Role of Repentance

⁷ *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* ⁸ *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* – Luke 3:7-8b

Notice the difference between Luke's telling and how Matthew tells the same story:

⁷ *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers!..."* – Matthew 3:7a

Matthew points to John's specific targeting of the religious elites: Pharisees and Sadducees. But Luke generalizes John's message. And I think it's because he wants us to hear John's call to repentance regardless of where we come from.

Repent...a word that basically means “turn around.”
“You’re going the wrong way!”

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That’s why Luke quotes this chunk of Isaiah 40:

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And **all people** will see God’s salvation.”
- Luke 3:4-6

Canadian Citizenship Exam

If you grew up in Canada, unless you’re currently in high school, or a little nerdy about Canadian culture and history, you probably don’t know the answers to these questions. But a first-generation immigrant who’s working toward their citizenship probably is.

John the Baptist is basically saying that to prepare for what God’s about to do, everyone’s starting from the same spot.

And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. - Luke 3:8

What John’s Baptism is About

³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. - Luke 3:2-3

In his book *Baptism in the Early Church*, scholar Everett Ferguson summarizes six functions of John’s baptism based on the gospels and other records like the historian Josephus:

1. It expressed conversionary repentance, a turning to a new way of life
2. It mediated divine forgiveness
3. It purified from uncleanness, ritual and moral
4. It foreshadowed the ministry of an expected figure (Jesus)
5. It was an initiation into the “true Israel”
6. It was a protest against the temple establishment by offering an alternative means of forgiveness of sins ²

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And it's really significant that John is baptizing people at the Jordan river. Because the Jordan is the place where Israel becomes Israel. It's the place where they go from wandering in the wilderness to walking into the promised land with Joshua.

Repentance as the great equalizer

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." - Luke 3:8a

John starts out with this command: *"anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."* - Luke 3:11

John says to tax collectors: *"Don't collect any more than you are required to."* - Luke 3:13)

Similarly, some soldiers of the Roman army come up to him...what should they do?

"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay." - Luke 3:14b

John's ministry of repentance was not just about this one-time act of baptism. It was a call to a path - a highway that God is building.

"In a sense to be a Christian is to always be on square one. If you start thinking you're on the second square, you lose something." - Ricky Stephen

To follow Jesus is to be open to the possibility of being wrong. To be ready to course correct and allow some rubble to be moved as a stretch of God's great highway is carved out in our lives.

III. We Lose Jesus' Baptism

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." - Luke 3:21-22

1. Jesus' baptism is a stamp of approval on John's ministry.

²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written:

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." - Luke 7:26-28

2. Jesus is identifying with Israel in His baptism

The Jordan is the start of Israel's story, and it's also the start of Jesus' ministry. And where Israel fails, He will succeed.

3. Jesus' baptism helps us understand His identity

In 2 Kings 2, Elijah has this passing-the-torch moment as he's taken away. In this story, we come to understand that Elisha's ministry will be more significant than his predecessor's - he inherits "a double portion" of Elijah's power. And in order for this to happen, Elisha crosses through the Jordan river, watches Elijah get carted off into heaven in a chariot, then comes back and does a bunch of miracles.

And if we go back to Luke 3, we see the spirit descending on Jesus. A thing that also happens when Samuel anoints Israel's first king. And a voice from Heaven - not John, but God the Father says, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." God the Son, the greatest of all prophets, the greatest of all kings. Here in Jesus' baptism. It's wild.

4. Jesus' baptism is a foreshadowing of the Gospel

In Jesus' baptism we see a foreshadowing of His death and resurrection - that He will go down, but He won't stay down.

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5. Jesus' baptism is an invitation to Christian baptism

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In the beginning of Acts 19, Paul makes it clear that there is a difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism.

John's baptism is about forgiveness of sins and repentance. But for Christians, baptism becomes a super loaded symbol. For us, baptism is a recognition of what Jesus has done for us – as Dave will say: “an outward expression or an inward reality.”

And it's laden with stories that Identify us with our spiritual history: with a good creation brought out of the chaos of the swirling waters, with a family saved from a flood, with a nation of slaves liberated in the crossing of a sea, with a river-crossing that marks the beginning of God's fulfilled promises. And with the ultimate cleansing forgiveness we find in Jesus.

Just like with John's baptism, our baptism is not some end-point milestone. It's square one. It's a great equalizer, bringing down the proud mountains, bringing up the low valleys.

Bringing all of us to the same waters, like little kids born all over again.



Open Up

1. What's the farthest you've travelled to see someone speak or perform? Who was it?
2. If you had to take a Canadian citizenship test today, do you think you'd pass? Why or why not?

Dig In

1. Read **Luke 3**. What do you notice? Notice how John the Baptist addressed two different career paths in **Luke 3:13-14**. If you brought your occupation (career, studies, parenting, etc.) to John, what might he say to you?
2. What does repentance look in your life? Have you had moments in your life where you needed to change course in order to follow Jesus? Do you have something in your life right now that's pulling you in the wrong direction?
3. If you have been baptized, what would it look like to regularly reflect on your baptism? If you haven't been baptized, what is holding you back?

Pray

Spend some time thanking God for the gift of baptism. Ask God to help us be a community that produces fruitful lives in line with repentance. Ask for God to continue to lower mountains, raise valleys, and make rough places smooth in our lives. Pray for those who are considering baptism.

LUKE

good news
great joy
for all



REFERENCES

¹ (First place Israel camps after crossing the Jordan in Joshua 4, place where David crosses over the Jordan to return to Israel in 2 Samuel 19:15, and the place where Elijah starts his final journey in 2 Kings 2)

² Ferguson, 93