



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Forerunner

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

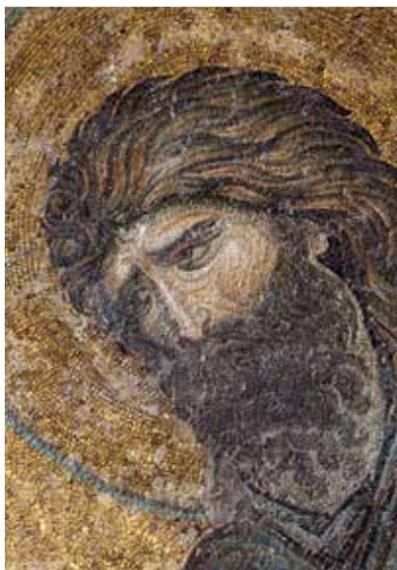
Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume explores the theme of **Cloud of Witnesses**. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

The Preaching of John the Baptist



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then slowly read through Matthew 3:1-11, which introduces John the Baptist and his ministry around the Jordan River.

Matthew 3:1-11

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea ²[and] saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” ³It was of him that the

prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

**“A voice of one crying out in the desert,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.’”**

⁴John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him ⁶and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

⁷When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. ⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰Even 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. ¹¹I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.”

After a few minutes of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the information provided in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

The four gospels have different ways of introducing John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Matthew he appears on the scene suddenly, with no reference to the story of Jesus’ birth and infancy that has gone before, and only gradually do John’s story and that of Jesus come together. But all four evangelists, however they introduce John, apply to him the words of Isaiah, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God” (40:3).

This text is a signal that Jews steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures would probably have recognized better than we do. The wilderness is a place of beginnings. After their escape from Egypt under Moses, it was in the wilderness that

the Israelites first walked with God and began the long journey to the Promised Land. The wilderness verse from Isaiah also comes from a time of beginning, when seven centuries after the Exodus the Israelites were emerging from the Babylonian exile and setting out on their trek back to Israel.



We may be struck by the use of the word “wilderness” in the Isaiah text where Matthew’s quote has “desert.” These English words both translate the same Hebrew word, *midbar*. Many modern gospel translations prefer to use “wilderness” because of the misleading connotations of “desert.” Desert conjures up a picture of vast stretches of sand and unrelieved heat, like the Sahara. A wilderness, on the other hand, like some of the uninhabited ter-

ritory in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, may have resources in it but no path, and without a guide to find the safe vegetation and water, it is dangerous and even life-threatening. It is this kind of wilderness that serves as the context for the journey that began when the Israelites found themselves freed from slavery and safe across the sea. The book of Exodus uses the physical journey as the model for the spiritual journey of the people of God through history and of each member personally.

What elements in a journey make it a rich image for reflecting on spiritual life?

John the Baptist is introduced as the one who will go before the Lord to open up the way for the final stage in the journey that began at the Exodus. He has been prepared by God for this moment. It is the beginning of the definitive journey to the Promised Land, a way that must pass through another exodus that will perfect and fulfill the first one. John has been sent to identify the guide for the final stage of the wilderness journey and to indicate by his preaching the message that guide, Jesus, will bring.

The entire passage from Matthew will be considered a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin (as on the previous page) are for discussion with others or for your own personal reflection.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea ²[and] saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

In Luke’s gospel, we already know a lot about John before he begins his preaching ministry. He is a major focus of Luke’s story of the infancy of Jesus, where he is a forerunner even in the details of his own birth, which is also foretold as a divine surprise. We learn of his parents, of his kinship with Jesus, and of the events surrounding his birth, all of which give evidence that he is destined for an important role later on, “for the hand of the Lord was with him”

(Luke 1:66). This special role is referred to when he is introduced in the Gospel of John—“A man named John was sent by God” (John 1:6)—but Matthew and Mark present him without background.

John is preaching “in the desert of Judea,” the wilderness area that extends from west of the Dead Sea and along the Jordan River to the north. This makes very clear his identification with the “voice of one crying in the desert” of Isaiah. Luke modifies this slightly, having John receive his calling in the wilderness but then move east to preach in the region around the Jordan, where there is water for his ministry of baptism (Luke 3:2-3).

The content of John’s preaching is brief and dramatic: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” In Matthew’s presentation he is truly the teaching forerunner of Jesus, preaching exactly the same message that Jesus will proclaim at the beginning of his own ministry (Matt 4:17). “Repent” is the verb form of the Greek word *metanoia*, which means more than a simple regret for mistakes and involves a willingness literally “to change one’s mind,” to turn one’s life around (conversion) in a complete re-orientation.

The other evangelists do not record these words of the Baptist’s preaching. Mark usually agrees with Matthew but in this instance Mark and Luke describe John’s program as “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

Repentance is sometimes reduced to mere regret. How does the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia* help you to think about repentance differently? Would such an understanding affect the way you approach asking for forgiveness or even approaching the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation?

of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Luke further has an encapsulation of John’s ministry in the canticle of his father, Zechariah: “You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77).

The Gospel of John does not mention the repentance theme in connection with John’s baptism ministry, which he presents rather as a sign pointing to Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:31-33). Though Matthew does not mention the theme of forgiveness of sins here, it will enter his narrative at a crucial moment later on, when he uniquely records Jesus’ words over the cup at the Last Supper as “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). It is from Matthew’s account that we have the phrase about forgiveness of sins in the words of institution in the Eucharist.

The “kingdom of heaven” (or “of God” in the other evangelists) is not a place but wherever people are living their lives according to God’s will and instruction. Some translations prefer the “reign of God” to avoid the idea of a physical place either here or in eternity. Where God reigns, evil loses its power in all its forms. Even death is overcome. Matthew’s use of “heaven” instead of “God” reflects the devout Jewish practice of avoiding pronouncing the sacred name of God.

What signs of God’s kingdom do you see within your parish community? Within the larger world?

³It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

“A voice of one crying out in the desert,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.’”

⁴John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him ⁶and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

We have already noted the importance of the citation of the passage from Isaiah, which appears in all four gospels, and the setting of the desert/wilderness as a place of beginnings. Later on in Matthew, Jesus will apply to John the verse from Malachi that Mark uses in his introduction, “Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you” (Matt 11:10; Mal 3:1). A few verses later in Malachi God speaks of sending Elijah the prophet “Before the day of the Lord comes” (3:23). In Matthew, Jesus links the anonymous messenger and Elijah and identifies John as their fulfillment: “If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come” (Matt 11:14; 17:11-13).

Though the identification of John with Elijah the prophet is specified only in the later chapters, it is hinted in the description of John’s garb as “clothing made of camel’s hair” and a leather belt. That combination was earlier the signature clothing of Elijah. King Azariah asked the mes-

sengers to describe the man who had sent a message to him. “‘He wore a hairy garment with a leather belt around his waist.’ ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite!’ he exclaimed” (2 Kgs 1:8). The hairy mantle later became generally a sign of prophetic ministry (Zech 13:4). The mention of “locusts and wild honey” emphasizes the ascetic life of John. Roasted locusts are vitamin-rich and still a common ingredient of the diet of the Bedouin in the Near East. Jesus will later refer to John’s austere lifestyle as a sign of his prophetic mission (Matt 11:8).



The baptism of John is carefully distinguished from that of Jesus, as will be made clear by Matthew’s comments in verse 11. The practice of ritual cleansing was a regular part of Jewish observance. “Baptism” is a technical name from the Greek word for plunging in water and covers various practices. The anointing of Aaron and his sons was preceded by washing (Exod 40:12-15); this was not a one-time practice, but was repeated according to ceremonial need (Lev 16:23-24). Judith bathed herself at the spring of the camp after every contact with the Gentile Holofernes (Jud 12:7).



The caves at Qumran,
located near the Dead Sea

There has been much discussion about the possible relationship of John to the Essene community that lived in the vicinity of John's ministry. The Essenes, a Jewish sect usually associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, had a yearly renewal ceremony with a ritual immersion that included an emphasis on repentance for sins. The Jews who accepted baptism by John were not implying any change in their faith but a desire to prepare for the coming of the reign of God by joining a movement of repentance. The Jewish historian Josephus (30–100), in his *Antiquities of the Jews*,

has given a description of John's ministry: "He commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism" (XVIII, 5, 2). Their very presence at the ceremony was a tacit acknowledgment of sinfulness and a desire for renewal.

Matthew emphasizes the wide participation by people from all over the area of the capital, Jerusalem, and Josephus sees in this a motivation for Herod's willingness later to kill John, who "feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion."

How might a ritual washing such as that given by John reinforce the true meaning of repentance (*metanoia*)?

⁷When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. ⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰Even 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. ¹¹I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.”

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders and would have had to come to the Jordan to investigate the popular religious movement they had heard about. In Matthew’s gospel, these two groups represent opposition to Jesus, though there were doubtless individuals among them who came to John with sincere intentions. The Pharisees held no official position but had devoted themselves to a closer observance of the Law. Nicodemus was a Pharisee open to Jesus (John 7:50-52) and there were Pharisees among the early Christians (Acts 15:5), including Paul himself (Phil 3:5). The Sadducees were officials in the temple and members of the priestly families. It is noteworthy that in Luke’s version of this scene John’s harsh words are addressed to all those who came out, “the crowds” (Luke 3:7).

“Brood of vipers!” implies malicious intent, perhaps an intention to infiltrate the repenting group in order to lead them away from John’s movement. This baptism is not magical, John would say. It is a sign of a good intention that can only be verified if there is follow-through in

a change of life. It will not be enough to invoke a pedigree as children of Abraham. Those who do not produce good fruit will not withstand the “coming wrath,” no matter under what name they serve.

John now explains his baptism, distinguishing it from that of Jesus, whose way he is preparing. His baptism reinforces an intention for repentance but provides no internal change itself. A different kind of baptism is coming, “with the holy Spirit and fire,” which will bring a change beyond what an individual might do personally.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

One way to pray with Scripture is to place yourself within the scene, allowing yourself to have a sensory experience of what is being reported so that you become part of the events as they unfold. Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits are credited with this type of prayer with Scripture. It is sometimes said that this method helps us to see that the biblical stories are not



Where do you find evidence of God's fire alive in you? What does your fruit look like?

just something that happened long ago but are still happening within our midst.

In the passage from Matthew 3:1-11, you might place yourself in the scene in any number of ways:

- *Place yourself among those who are coming to John to be baptized.*
- *Place yourself among the Pharisees and Sadducees who are investigating John's baptism.*
- *Perhaps even imagine yourself as John, the one who is calling others to repentance.*

What do you see and hear? What does the river feel like? What do you see in people's facial expressions? Which words of John encourage you, or challenge you, or even make you uncomfortable?

Sit a few moments with these mental images and offer to God your response to the experience of encountering John the Baptist (or being John the Baptist).

Living the Word

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Think of the areas in your life where you already bear good fruit. This might be in the area of prayer, service to others in need, hospitality, patience in the midst of adversity, and so on. How might your good fruit multiply if connected with a community effort? Investigate opportunities in

your parish or town where your desire for further conversion might bear more abundant fruit. Volunteer in an agency that needs your expertise or where you might learn a new skill or virtue. Write about your experience of deepening conversion and share it through social media.