

## Advent 3: On the Road to Restoration *December 13, 2020* John the Baptist denies being the Messiah

*based on John 1:19-28*

I love spending time in the temple because I feel closer to God. I can listen to a reading from the Torah or discuss a religious passage. I can observe the transaction of temple business, watch sacrificial rituals, or study the diverse assortment of people who flow in and out of the temple every day. Those crowds have been steadily growing. More and more people are stopping in Jerusalem, having come from or on their way to Bethany beyond the Jordan, and all because of one man.

To say he is unique would be an understatement. His name is John, but they refer to him as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist because he calls people to confess their sins and baptizes the repentant. Reports are that he is a blunt man, and that both his demeanor and appearance follow suit. They say instead of a traditional linen tunic, he wears clothing made of camel's hair, and he eats locusts and wild honey. I know some have returned saying that rather than graciously receiving those who had journeyed to hear his message, he verbally attacked them. Yet he claims to be a man of God, and no one who sees him seems to doubt this is true.

It was no surprise that both the Sadducees and Pharisees took notice and began asking questions. They discovered that although he was born into a priestly family, he was not given his father's name and he did not take up his father's work, which is highly unusual. John's father, Zechariah, is a priest. In the eyes of the authorities, that also makes his son John a priest. John grew up in the remote wilderness areas of Judea, so the desert is familiar to him. But they certainly didn't understand why a priest was acting in such an unconventional way.

John's claims (that he is baptizing in preparation of the Lord's coming) made people start to wonder if he was the longed-for Messiah, or Elijah, or even the prophet. Once these questions started circulating, the Jewish leaders had to take action. So they decided to send a delegation of priests and Levites to talk to John and get some answers. My uncle was a part of this group, and when he asked me to come along as a witness, I jumped at the opportunity. I was anxious to get a close look at the man.

Upon our arrival, they wasted no time. The questioning began immediately. "Who are you? Are you the Messiah?" I knew they were asking this because every Jew believes that sooner or later, God will intervene to save them. But we don't have a common understanding how this will happen.

John did not seem to be caught off guard or alarmed by this question. He simply rejected the idea. In fact, he passionately declared loud enough for everyone to hear, "I am not the Messiah."

They asked, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" This question did not surprise me either. It is believed that Elijah will return to signal the Messiah's coming and prepare the world to receive him. Having secretly wondered about this theory myself, I held my breath in anticipation of his answer.

Without hesitation John's voice rang out clear and strong, "I am not."

"Are you the prophet?" they asked. Every Jew recognizes the reference in this question—a scriptural promise that the Lord will raise up a prophet from our midst. John's response was short and to the point. "No."

A heavy silence followed, and I found myself thoroughly fascinated by this strange man. He stood alone before a delegation of Jewish leaders who wore their authority like suits of armor, and he did not give the slightest indication that he was concerned by their questions. He also did not attempt to explain

himself. He obviously had no interest in appeasing anyone. He did not waver or tremble as I had seen men do in the temple courts. In fact, he looked completely composed. I found it quite extraordinary.

Someone finally broke the stillness. “Who are you? You must give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

John replied, “I am nothing more than a voice bidding people to prepare the way for the Lord.”

Someone else asked, “If you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet, why are you baptizing?”

“I am only baptizing with water,” John said, “but there is one among you, one you do not recognize, who will come after me, and I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals.”

I was stunned! At the very least, John was a powerful preacher. People were coming from far and wide to hear him. From what I could tell, he was a man brimming with conviction and purpose, but he identified himself as nothing more than a servant. I don’t think I had ever seen anyone with that kind of power within their grasp not reach for it with both hands.

Who is this man called John the Baptizer? He willingly threw on a cloak of humility that would have been too heavy for most men to carry, and he wore it as if it weighed nothing. Over and over, he refocused attention away from himself and toward God. I found his message to be both a warning and a call to action. I quickly recognized my own need to pay attention to the places I had wandered off the path, the need to reset my course. On the road back to Jerusalem, I found myself recalibrating my thoughts. I discovered lost pieces of myself I didn’t even know were missing.

I also found it odd that though I never stepped into the water, by the time I arrived back in

Jerusalem I couldn’t deny some type of change had taken place. I had returned renewed and restored. When people ask me about my time in the wilderness, I tell them John the Baptizer was clear about who he was and who he was not. I ask them if they can say the same.

Who are you? Do you know?

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John 1:19-28 New International Version  
**John the Baptist Denies Being the Messiah**

<sup>19</sup> Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders<sup>[a]</sup> in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

<sup>26</sup> “I baptize with<sup>[c]</sup> water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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## Psalm 126 New International Version

### A song of ascents.

<sup>1</sup> When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.

<sup>2</sup> Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,  
The LORD has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, LORD,  
like streams in the Negev.

<sup>5</sup> Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.

<sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.

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### Finding Joy on the road to restoration

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; *Psalm 126*; Luke 1:46-55;  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; **John 1:6-8, 19-28**

A man from Drake, who traveled to Saskatoon on business. To keep the Sabbath it meant not riding the trains on Sunday. So he finished his business late Saturday night, and stayed over in Saskatoon until Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left the hotel looking for a place to worship. The streets were quite deserted, but finally he saw a policeman and asked him for directions to the nearest Protestant church.

The stranger thanked the police officer for the information and was about to walk off when he turned & asked: "Why have you recommended that particular church? There must be several churches nearby that you could have suggested.

The police officer smiled and replied: "I'm not a church man, but the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking church-people in Saskatoon. I thought that would be the kind of church you would like to attend."

We Bible constantly invites you and I, as part of our Christian pilgrimage, the duty to be joyful. Was this the reason Jesus used a little child as an example of the kingdom of God, because of the natural joyfulness of children?

If we were using Latin in worship, the first word we would have heard in today's liturgy would have been "Gaudete", or "rejoice." This word is sprinkled throughout today's readings. Isaiah proclaims God has sent him to bring "glad tidings to the poor" and "I rejoice heartily in the Lord. In my God is the joy of my soul."

Mary's Magnificat exclaims "My soul rejoices in my God, my spirit finds joy in God my Savior". Thessalonians instructs us, "**Rejoice always**" and then "**give thanks.**"

And Psalm 126, tells us to be filled with songs of joy. It resonates with the prophetic voice of joy-filled reversal & restoration for those who have suffered long and have tearfully lived in expectancy.

The Isaiah and Psalms texts were first written in the **Hebrew** language. It's important to note that Hebrew has more words for rejoicing and joy than any other language. And Hebrew is known for having few words. In the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew root words, found in 27 different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship. So what can we learn from this?

First, Hebrew religious ritual and language proclaims God as the source of joy.

Second, In contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration.

Third, A good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of their life.

Fourth, Our scriptures note that pure joy is joy in the Creator, as both its source and object. The Almighty gives joy to us and we return it back. So the Old Testament is a book of joy!

And the New Testament is a book of Good News! God wants us to pray continuously, to be joyful and to thank God in all circumstances.

The theme of restoration has been in every Psalm this Advent. It is continued today in Psalm 126. The theological theme of restoration is knitted together with the theme of rejoicing. This psalm is used often in the lectionary as an eloquent lyrical prayer.

Psalm 126 is in a collection of poems known as the "Songs of Ascents." To get to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, you have to travel upwards. And the people were looking up to a new future, where they were hoping God was going to be faithful to His people. These psalms likely were collected together for the faithful to use as they made pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Psalm 126 has two parts, verses 1-3, and 4-6. The first part, recalls God's past acts of restoration and the emotions of celebration and joy of laughter that accompanied those saving acts. The phrase, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion," most likely has in mind the return of the people to the land following the Babylonian exile. But in the broader biblical story, the phrase recalls many divine restorations. Here are just a few:

The restoration of Sarah to Abraham.  
The restoration of Joseph to his brothers.  
The restoration of the people to the land.  
The restoration of the ark to the people after the Philistines captured it.  
God meeting Paul on the Damascus Road.  
The birth of the Messiah;  
The restoration of young Jesus to his parents.  
The resurrection.  
When and how and how often have you experienced Jesus' restoration?

Imagine how happy people were after these events. You have your list of restorations from your personal and family and this community's experiences. Plus that of the people of God.

The phrase, "we were like those who dream," conjures to the imagination both theological

and emotional meaning. **Theologically**, "those who dream" are those who receive visions from God, like Daniel & Mary. These dreams often are the divine bringing restoration in some way to people. They include the re-opening of lines of communication between God and people.

In terms of the **emotional** content, "those who receive," dream and receive visions, often experience and express ecstatic joy. Like when David danced beside the ark as it was brought into Jerusalem. The picture is of spontaneous and uncontainable joy. "Our mouth was filled with laughter. Our tongues with shouts of joy." It's a reason music & singing is such an important part of worship! It gives us words to express our faith, trust and joy in the Savior.

The **first stanza**, verses 1-3, also contains what may be perhaps the most surprising testimony concerning God's gracious deeds in the entire Old Testament. It's "**the nations**," that is, the people who worship other gods and often threaten Israel, who actually praise God! The very people who, during Israel's years in Babylon, looked down on God's people. But these nations witnessed the restoration of Israel to their land and to their God and they said, "The Lord has done great things for them!"

In the New Testament, we are reminded of the non-Israelite magi coming to worship the one who was born "King of the Jews." We read of the faith of the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant by "Just saying the word." And there is the Roman centurion at the cross who announced, "Truly this man was God's Son!" It's a surprise and important to notice that Hebrew, Jewish worship language, talks about the nations, all people, the world, being restored and rejoicing.

Even more surprising, the testimony of the nations' to the Almighty's deeds, inspires Israel to respond with its own testimony, repeating the words of the nations verbatim: "The Lord has done great things for us," verses 2 and 3.

Often in the psalms, the enemies' words are quoted as reason for God to punish them. (Ps

10:12-14; the ending of Ps 137). But here, the words of the nations are quoted approvingly.

So it's shocking the people of God repeat the words of their enemies. Why? Because God's gracious and faithful acts of restoration are so self-evident, even the unbelieving nations can see them. Because the blind nations see those acts, the often-even-more blind people of God can see them, too. This is a huge dream and vision for back then and today. How do we see God working in the world today?

The **second part**, verses 4-6, develops the themes introduced in the first stanza and rephrases them in the form of renewed appeals for restoration. The psalm paints bountiful agricultural images tied to spiritual, economic and health restoration:

Dry river beds coursing with torrents of water.  
Farmers weeping as they plant because they did not expect a harvest.

Those same farmers singing joyfully as they harvest, because creation has produced an unlooked-for bounty.

Those same farmers bear heavy sheaves of produce as they go home from the fields

These word pictures may reflect a prayer for rescue from drought, and they are metaphors for a people in need of God's restoring actions in many different crises over the years. Crises of spiritual draught, economic problems, health concerns including plagues, national military defeat, internal conflict, bad weather and so on.

It's appropriate to characterize the psalm as "joy remembered and joy anticipated." The gathered community of faith calls on God to come to its aid as it struggles through a difficult situation. And it remembers the many times their Savior has touched, led, rescued, healed, accepted their repentance, and restored them.

Three powerful images bring Psalm 126 to life. **First**, there is a "ringing cry of rejoicing" three times in verses 2, 5, and 6. The Hebrew word used here suggests a loud and impassioned celebration of God's goodness. This word is

also used in the book of Psalms to describe the actions of all of God's creation. Forests and hills, offer a "ringing cry of rejoicing." All humanity, even the nations, along with all creation, is encouraged to celebrate God's care.

**Second**, water is a powerful imagery in many psalms. The seasonal water channels in verse 4, that fill with nourishing water in the rainy season in the Negev desert, give way to the tears of those sowing arid fields in hopes of a good crop that feed their households. We know water equals crops, life, refreshment and hope.

**Third**, the agricultural imagery in verses 5 & 6, of sowing and reaping, is called a "merism. Those who analyze literary structures say this is a linguistic phenomenon that combines two contrasting parts of the whole, to refer to the whole. For example, in order to say that someone "searched everywhere," we could use the merism, "searched high and low." So the words "sow" & "reap," indicate the beginning and the end of the farming process. They are meant to be understood as representative of the whole season's process. The planting, watchful care, weeding, finally the harvest, then celebration!

The Almighty's deliverance, the Creator's good care, may feel like the refreshing water of the Negev turned to tears of struggle to plant a good crop. Psalm 126 tells us, though, that those tears will give way to the gift of a good crop to feed, nourish, and restore the people of God. In the end, all creation can and will give a "ringing cry of rejoicing" to this good God.

This sowing and reaping imagery of Psalm 126 is a powerful reminder of the importance of "place," because without "**place**," some where to dwell and call home, the concepts of sowing and reaping, in whatever form they might manifest themselves, are simply not possible.

Many people today have been "displaced" and struggle to find a place to call their own. In a world so increasingly divided between the "haves" and the "have nots," the "citizens" and the "immigrants," the "insiders" & "outsiders,"

these words are a powerful reminder of the importance of “place.”

Without “place,” how can people grow and reap a good “crop”? Without “place,” how can people dream and laugh and prosper? Without “place,” how can parents provide for their children? In many places, without a “place,” an address, it’s difficult to get a job. Without “place” how can we give a “ringing cry of rejoicing”? Psalm 126 reminds us to cooperate with God’s good provisions to extend to and be available to everyone. That is God’s dream of what Jesus came to earth for.

We also dream like the Israelites dream. Our dreams include the place of the kingdom of God. Our dreams include the place called heaven. So we are called to get on the road to readiness. To be on the road to repentance. And to long for the joy from what the road of restoration offers us, as we look back on what God has done; as we look toward what God will do; and as we live out what God is doing. Come, get on the road to restoration – whatever that means for you. Jesus is inviting you & me.

Psalm 126 is an appeal couched in the form of imaginative wishes: "May those who...." We as Advent people who approach Christmas, recall God's restorative acts in the past. We recall the testimony of the nations to God's deliverance. We remember our own joy. And we know that until the Son of God comes again, we will be in constant & everlasting need of God's continued reversal & restoration. The road to restoration is through repentance, on a journey toward wholeness in body, soul, spirit and community.

To use another hide and seek analogy, when the Girl’s Club play hide & seek, they are charged up. You can hear their whispered excitement when they are hiding and seeking. You can see them on edge with enthusiasm and anticipation. And then when someone is found, you can’t help but hear their shouts and yells. Someone is discovered. Someone has found another. Someone has been affirmed they are part of the group. It’s the loud joy of restoration.

Psalm 126 reminds us that “the Lord has done great things for us.” And, like the dreamers of old, we are called to live expectantly, fully convinced that the tears and weeping of our day will not have the last word. The God we serve is the God of reversal and restoration.