

Kirkwall Presbyterian Church
'John the Baptist'
Luke 3:1-23
March 8, 2026
By Keith Marcy

Somehow John the Baptist knew what kind of religion the religious leaders were promoting in Israel. Did the Holy Spirit directly tell him? Maybe. He could have. Or He could have let John see first-hand the hypocrisy and give him the wisdom to recognize it as false. In the following story, I have taken the liberty to fill in the blank of John's formative years the way he may have become aware of false religion.

Zechariah lived with his wife, Elizabeth, in the hills of Judea, north of Jerusalem. Zechariah was a priest working shifts in the glamorous Temple in Jerusalem. The couple were getting on in years. They had no children. Zechariah had prayed often that God would bless them with a son, but the prospects now looked impossible. Then came the memorable day when Zechariah's division was on duty. He was burning incense on the altar in the Holy Place in the Temple when the angel, Gabriel, appeared to him. *'Your prayers have been heard. Elizabeth will bear a son. He will be a delight to you. From birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will be a powerful voice for the Lord. You shall call him John.'*

And so, it came true. 9 or 10 months later, Elizabeth delivered a bouncy baby boy. Their little town was buzzing with the news:

Elizabeth!!!

Why she's old enough to be a great grandmother!

Oh my. How will she ever cope?

Nevertheless, a crowd of ladies gathered, full of advice, encouragement and suggested names.

Then Zechariah wrote on a piece of slate: *'His name is John.'*

Mouths dropped open. Eyes bugged out.

JOHN! There are no 'John's in your family tree. Why John?

Then Zechariah spoke, *'The angel Gabriel told me what to name him before he was conceived. He is John.'*

Zechariah and Elizabeth were devout Jews. John was raised being taught the Jewish history and all the wonders God had done for the Israelite nation. It was very probable that John went to school in Jerusalem, given the position of his father. How would you have coped having him in your

class? He was a young man, filled with God's Spirit, keen to learn, but questioning every man-made tradition. When Zechariah was working at his duties in the temple, John may have wandered around the massive, ornate structure, observing the rituals, and witnessing the insincerity of Jewish worshippers. Perhaps this conversation may have taken place as the father and son walked home one evening:

"Well, John, how did school go today?"

"It was a good day! Only had one argument with the rabbi."

"Only one?"

"Yes, it went on all day – from the same passage from the prophet Isaiah."

"Oh!" Zechariah was reluctant to ask details. It would not be the first time the rabbi had summoned Zechariah and asked him to keep his son at home.

The pair walked on. After a while, John spoke. "Say Dad, after school I wandered around the temple courts. You know where the lambs are kept that people can buy for a sacrifice?"

"Yes."

"In that pen, one had a snotty nose; two were lame; one could not see out of its right eye, and another was missing an ear. And one was a ewe! I have read that because a sacrificial lamb is a substitute for the Messiah, they are to be perfect...and male. What gives??"

Zechariah paused before answering, "Oh, well, we must overlook a lot of details. You know the important thing is that people bring a sacrifice."

John stood still. He felt his face flushing with anger. "Oh, so it is okay for them to write their own Bible so long as they go through the motions pretending to be people of Jehovah?"

Zechariah said no more; he just walked on. But he was thinking, *'I am not sure my son will ever fit into our mold to serve as a priest. He is just too – too – he's just too godly. Why, he is a fanatic for holiness.'*

Zechariah was not surprised when John was refused admission to study at the renowned university in the city of Jerusalem where priests, and scribes and teachers of the law are trained for service. The board had written, *"Your son has proven himself to be fanatical, argumentative and non-conforming. We do not want him."*

John's reply was defiant. *"That is fine. I do not want to fit their ungodly mold. I am going to the desert to be trained by the ultimate Teacher, Jehovah my God."* Elizabeth wept the day John left with only a rucksack on his back. Yet deep down, she was prepared for this day. He was a miracle baby. God had a special work for him to do. He had always been a fearless non-conformist. *"Oh God,"* she may have prayed, *"May he always be!"*

In the desert beyond the Jordan, a place of rocky craigs and thorny brambles, a few fig trees, a home of locusts, lizards and jackals, John camped. And the Spirit of God spoke to the Holy Spirit within him, preparing him to prepare the people for his Cousin, the Son of God. And when the time was right, John began to teach – but who?? Likely his audience began with a few Bedouin – roaming shepherds, and maybe some traders using the road along the Jordan.

Word spread. *"There is a man dressed like the Elijah of old who reminds us of a prophet of old. Go listen to him"*

John was preaching something so old it was new again.

"God detests your organized religion. You pretend to be His people offering your alms and your offerings and sacrificing your animals. But it is all phony. Repent! Turn away from sin. Admit to God that your lives have been selfish. You have had no regard for the poor or orphans or widows. Some of you have used your positions to steal; others to extort money and punish people for crimes they did not commit. You have lied and cheated others, and you have made a mockery out of your religious festivals. Repent and be baptized; then live a new life walking away from sin – not into it."

Some became John's helpers. They were called John's disciples and thousands heard his message and were baptized.

And then...one day...John's Cousin showed up and insisted John baptize Him.

"No! No! No!" shouted John. But Jesus said *"Yes!"*

When John lifted Jesus out of the water a voice was heard from Heaven *"You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased."* John saw the Holy Spirit come down in the form of a bird and light upon Jesus. It was a sign

for John – this is Him. This is the Messiah. This is the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

John's ministry would soon end. But he had prepared a people who only knew an outward, superficial form of religion, to look inward, at the evil intent of their hearts and realize – Yes, we **need** a Savior!!

Sometimes History repeats itself. Are we victims of scholars rewriting the Bible? Some of us are the victims of religious people altering the Scriptures or ignoring them to promote a watered-down gospel which is no gospel at all. Some of us have been deluded into a form of religion that leaves Christ out of Church. We need to hear the Prophet in the desert declare, *"You brood of vipers, produce fruit in keeping with repentance."* We need to meet the One John told us about— *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* He knows you! He is waiting for you – to come unto Him. He has a gift for you!

A gift?? What Gift? Come next week!