

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International

(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 3:1-12

Year A - Advent 2, Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Year A - Advent 2, Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Events in relation to the conception and birth of John the Baptist are reported in Luke 1:5–24, 57–80. In 1:80, Luke states: *“The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly in Israel.”*

John’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were both descendants of Levi. Zechariah served as a priest on the staff of the Jerusalem Temple. Without a doubt, John could have followed in his father’s footsteps in pursuing a prestigious and well-paying career as a Temple priest. However, he did not — but chose to spend life in the wilderness prior to becoming a radical prophet.

It is possible that John the Baptist came to understand that the Temple system was corrupt and wanted nothing to do with it. Scholars suggest that when Jesus appeared on the scene, approximately 9,000 priests served on the Temple staff. However, they did not serve in Jerusalem full-time, but twice each year for one week at a time.

In his Gospel, John makes two references to where John the Baptist carried out his ministry: Bethany Beyond the Jordan, to the east of the River Jordan (1:28) and Aenon near Salim, to the west of the River Jordan (3:23). Matthew 3:1–12 provides information about the radical nature of John the Baptist’s ministry and message.

Verse 3:1: The reference to “In those days” is unrelated to what immediately precedes it.

- v. 1:1–17 traces Jesus’ genealogy back to David and Abraham.
- v. 1:18–24 lists events associated with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, where apparently, according to Matthew, Joseph and Mary were residents.
- v. 2:1–23 describes the visit of the Wise Men, Herod the Great’s attempt to have Jesus put to death, the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt, and their eventual return to the Holy Land, where they take up residence in Nazareth.

The mission and ministry of John the Baptist served as a signal for our Lord to leave the obscurity of His hometown and begin His own public ministry.

Verse 3:2: John the Baptist is the first to proclaim the good news of the breaking in of God’s Kingdom. When doing so, he calls on his hearers to “repent” — to rethink and radically reform their attitude toward God and what it means to walk through life His way. Note: Matthew’s phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven” (which he uses numerous times) is synonymous with “the Kingdom of God.” It describes the present-tense reality of faith in a person’s life; it is not merely a reference to some future heavenly afterlife.

In this regard, the NRSV translation referring to the Kingdom of Heaven as having “come near” is misleading. It suggests that the Kingdom is on its way and will soon break into history. However, the truth of the matter is that the Kingdom of God has already broken into history in the person of Jesus. Jesus is its King and models its lifestyle by walking the way of a Servant-without-limit. Jesus rejected completely the hope that when the Messianic Age broke into history, the Jewish people would be given dominion over the nations of the world forever.

Verse 3:3: John is the successor of Isaiah, from whom he derives his theme (see Isaiah 40:3, a passage quoted twice in the Rule of Qumran, where the Essene community resided, and whose spirituality was greatly influenced by the Isaiah passage).

Verse 3:4: John wears the same clothing by which Elijah had once been identified (2 Kings 1:8). He is the last prophet with links to the Old Testament era, but points to the “new things” that were about to break in through the ministry of Jesus.

Verse 3:5: John attracted quite an audience. People came to him from Judea and Jerusalem and from all along the Jordan River. For centuries, devout Jews had been waiting for the voice of an authentic prophet.

Hence, the remarkable response to John's message.

Verse 3:6: Those who came to John were baptized by him in the River Jordan — and confessed their sins in the process.

When non-Jews wished to embrace the Jewish faith, a rite of baptism was used as a sign of their new beginning. However, a rite of baptism for Jews was new and revolutionary. The Jewish claim of being a privileged and chosen people was misguided. Baptism called for a total renunciation of the things of the past and a total self-dedication to the things of the future — the things of the Kingdom of God that Jesus would teach and model.

Verses 3:7–10: In the parallel passages in his Gospel, Luke (3:1–14) focuses on sociological elements that have to do with sharing clothing and food with the needy, about being totally honest in all aspects of life, and never practicing extortion. In Matthew's Gospel, John echoes the eschatological, apocalyptic tone of the ancient prophets.

Verse 3:7: Among those who come to John are Pharisees and Sadducees. Most likely, they come to the Jordan to see what is happening. They represent the “establishment” of their day.

Perhaps the Pharisees were concerned that they might lose some of their students and admirers. Perhaps the Sadducees (who were very much involved in the “salvation marketing system” carried out in the Temple system) were afraid that they might lose some of their income. Remarkably, John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees as a “brood of vipers” (an insulting label!), comparing them to snakes scurrying for dear life before a bush fire! Furthermore, he asks them, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” The fire that would bring cleansing to some would bring destruction to others!

Verse 3:8: John exhorts his hearers to “bear fruit worthy of repentance,” an exhortation that would have been a “slap in the eye” for those who felt that they had done more than enough to be invited to sit on the best of sofas in the most prominent place in the coming Messianic Banquet. However, these new arrivals would have to prove their good faith by genuine sorrow for their past ways and by producing God-pleasing fruit. And they must do that immediately!

Verse 3:9: Although some of the new arrivals could

boast about being descendants of Abraham, John assured them that their boast was worthless! (Likewise, we today deceive ourselves if we think we live on the spiritual capital of our fathers in the faith.) After all, God could raise up children of Abraham from stones!

John foretells the creation of a New Israel — but, unlike Jesus, makes no reference to the call of the Gentiles.

Verse 3:10: Here, and in verses 11–12, John draws on prophetic literature for symbols of the coming eschatological judgment: ax, fire, winnowing fork, divine wrath. Those “spiritual trees” who do not produce God-pleasing fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Powerful language indeed!

Verses 3:11–12: Although he baptizes with water for repentance, John will be followed by Someone much more powerful than he — someone so great that John is not worthy of carrying His sandals. Still today in many parts of the Middle East, it is totally unacceptable for anyone to touch another person's feet, or to put on or remove his sandals. Never!

The One who will follow John will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire — words that foreshadow the Pentecostal baptism of Jesus' disciples. After all, the disciples did not really begin to understand Jesus' message until they witnessed His ascension (Acts 1:6–11, ch. 2).

In the words of George MacDonald, “they were all waiting for a king, to slay their foes and raise them high.” They needed to understand that Jesus had come to do His “servant thing, on cruel cross to die.” The implications of these two sentences are enormous.

We would do well to ask, “If John the Baptist were to reappear on the earthly stage, what message would he proclaim to the organized church around the world?”