

# Introduction

For many years I have thought that the mythology surrounding Christmas was harmless. When I speak of the mythology of Christmas, I mean such things as the drummer boy, the three Kings, and everything happening on a snowy day in Nazareth. I checked the weather yesterday and Nazareth had a high of 70° and a low of 60°.

Now, I am not so sure that these mythological changes and additions are harmless. I am certain that they are not helpful.

Why do I say this? One reason is because I see an increasing gap between what Christmas has become in the West and what the early church fathers said it should be. Advent is theoretically a penitential season. In the history of the church, the blowout party season was actually Easter!

Sometimes I know that we want to ask churchgoers at about this time of year, “but what did you go out to church to see?”

## Advent in General: Review

This year during advent we have been purposely following the lectionary and the Propers from the Book Of Common Prayer. It was my desire that we follow our reformational fathers and see what they have to teach us about Advent. Texts regarding the birth of Christ, and related texts are limited to Christmas day itself and the 12 days thereafter up until the Epiphany. The announcement of the Angel to Mary is in March, where it should be.

In Advent I, the gospel lesson was from Jesus’ triumphal entry. In Advent II, the gospel lesson was taken from Luke 21, where Jesus talks about the end of the world. Today, Advent III, we talk about John the Baptist who prepared the way for the Lord’s arrival.

What we learn from them is that their eyes were fixed on the second coming.

With these things in mind, let us turn to Matthew 11.

## Great John

John the Baptist was a great man. Jesus himself says so.

“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!”

“And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:11, 14.

## John and Jesus

John and Jesus know each other.

1. After the flesh they are closely related. They have bumped into each other several times already. The first time was before they were both born and Mary went to visit Elizabeth. The next time was at the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus heard that John had been put into prison, that seemed to deeply affect Jesus and he withdrew into Galilee. Just two chapters earlier, some of the disciples of John went to Jesus about their failure to fast at an appropriate time. And here we are again in chapter 11.<sup>2</sup>
2. Theologically, their relationship is even more significant. John is the first to confess Jesus as the son of God, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and for whose ministry John had been preparing the region.<sup>3</sup> John had started losing disciples to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Here in 11, Jesus declares that John is the end of an era and is the greatest of that era as a prophet. “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU’”<sup>5</sup>, as prophesied by Malachi.<sup>6</sup>
3. From birth, John has been on this path of preparing the way for Messiah. He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

## John the Man

That’s the prophet John, the theological John, the John of the vast meta-narrative of God’s redemptive plan. However, we also have the human John.

- Bold John is in prison, because of his courageous opposition to Herod’s incestuous marriage.
- There is the mighty evangelist and preacher John. “Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins”<sup>8</sup>.
- And there is the humble John, who says of the one who is coming, “He

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2 Luke 1:41, Matthew 3:13, 4:12, 9:14 and following, and 11:2 and following.

3 See John 1:29–36.

4 John 1:37.

5 Matthew 11:10.

6 Malachi 3:1.

7 Luke 1:17.

8 Matthew 3:5–6.

who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals”.

It’s this human John who sends disciples to Jesus and asks, “are you the Messiah?” Are you the anointed one, the promised redeemer, the one promised by God from ages past? “Or shall we look for someone else?”

## Lessons Learned

- We are reminded that we are all part of God’s metanarrative, part of a great plan.
- At the same time, we are ordinary people, just as John was.
- And like John, we want to know if what we believe is true and if following Jesus is worth it. John is looking for assurance, meaning, purpose, and a future.

## Greater Jesus

### How does Jesus respond?

1. In the parallel passage in Luke 7, he first performs miracles.
2. *Then* he sent a message back to John through his disciples.

Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”<sup>10</sup>

### Jesus interprets John

When you went to see John, what were you looking for?  
- A reed shaken by the wind? Weak and inoffensive?  
- Soft clothing? Impressively powerful, protected from real life?  
- No, a prophet, a speaker of truth. Prophets are those who kept getting themselves killed. He’s the one who prepares the way—for **me!**

### Jesus interprets himself

Jesus ends what he says with the important statement: “blessed is he who does not take offense at Me”. “Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.”

If John is the prophet who prepares the way, then he is preparing the way for *me!* What you think about John relates to what you think about me—and blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 3:11.

<sup>10</sup> 11:4–6.

John is offended by Jesus, because it may be that he's not acting like he should. Isn't he the deliverer? Isn't he the promised one? Then why isn't he delivering me?

## Application

In verses 4–6, Jesus quotes from three different chapters in Isaiah: 26, 35, and 61. In all three chapters, Jesus stops short of the texts that signify final redemption, judgment, and glory. It is as if Jesus is saying to John – and to us – that his presence signifies that we are almost there, but not quite.

- “Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.” Come, my people, enter into your rooms And close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while Until indignation runs its course. For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place To punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; And the earth will reveal her bloodshed And will no longer cover her slain. In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, With His fierce and great and mighty sword, Even Leviathan the twisted serpent; And He will kill the dragon who lives in the sea.”<sup>11</sup>
- “Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, “Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you.” Then the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy ... A highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, And the ransomed of the LORD will return And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.”<sup>12</sup>
- “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 26:19–27:1.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 35:3–10.

the LORD, that He may be glorified.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus left John in jail. He didn't give him release, because it wasn't time for the radical, fundamental end of all things. But that doesn't mean that hope isn't real.

“But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

## Collect

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare the way before you: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

My job today is to be John and say, “prepare the way of the Lord; the kingdom of God is at hand”.

Take heart, you are not forgotten!

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 61:1–3.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Peter 3:8–15.