

**(Worship leader reads Matthew 3:1-6)**

Ah, so you have heard of me! I'm so glad I haven't been forgotten. Your scriptures call me John the Baptist, but I prefer to go by J.B. these days. Sounds a bit more modern, don't you think? Plus, with the nickname "Baptist" some get confused and I think I'm part of your modern-day Baptist Church, but I lived a long time before that movement even started.

I do, however, like the name *John* that my father gave me. While my father, Zechariah, was serving in the temple, he was selected to enter the holy of holies to light incense and offer prayers. While there, an angel appeared to him and said that his prayer had been heard, for my parents had longed for a child to be born to them in their older years. The angel said, "Your wife will have a son, and you will name him John."<sup>1</sup>

When I was born, everyone thought my father would name me Zechariah after himself, but he insisted that I be named John. He and my mother, Elizabeth, raised me in the Jewish faith, and as an

adult I began to speak about the changes I felt needed to occur in the lives of believers, and that's how I got the nickname of "baptizer," from all the baptisms I did along the Jordan River. We Jews used ritual cleansings in water long before you Christians did. When people converted to Judaism, they entered the purification waters, what we called the *mikveh*, a ritual immersion in water.

But I stretched this practice a bit further. I did more than just immerse those from the Jewish faith, I accepted even the Gentiles—the non-Jews—who wanted to turn their lives around. I spoke about repentance. The idea is based on the Hebrew word *shuv*, meaning "to turn around."

Think of it this way: when you're traveling somewhere and you get lost, you have to stop and figure out where you're going. If you've gone too far in the wrong way, you have to turn around and go the right way. That's what *repent* means. If you're lost while traveling through life, you have to stop, ask for directions, and turn around. I know many of you may not like to stop and ask for

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directions, but sometimes in life we need to stop and turn around our lives.

I told people that through repentance comes forgiveness for sins.<sup>2</sup> We hate to admit that we make mistakes. We don't like to be wrong, so we often try to hide it. But before one can turn around and repent, one has to admit one has sinned—has made a mistake. The word *sin* comes from an old Greek archery term, meaning “to miss the mark,” meaning the arrow doesn't hit the target. None of us are perfect. We all miss the mark, and when we miss the target, we hurt one another, and so we all need forgiveness.

Some religious leaders weren't too happy about my practice of baptizing everyone and offering forgiveness. Listen to the next part of my story to hear what happened.

***(Worship leader reads Matthew 3:7-12)***

People were restless in my day and eager for things to change. They were hungry to hear that God forgives them and loves them. I proclaimed baptism as a sign of God's forgiveness, which goes with a person's willingness to turn around and repent. The water reminds us that God cleanses us, washes away our sins. People flocked down to the river to hear me preach and to be baptized. Some thought I was the prophet Elijah, for the Bible described him as a prophet who wore a camel's hair robe, just as I did. I guess some thought I sounded like him. Some believed Elijah would return one day before the Messiah arrived.

Some of our religious leaders, known as the Pharisees and Sadducees, didn't care for my message, for I was also speaking to and including the outsiders, to those who weren't necessarily religious. When the religious leaders objected to what I was doing, I called them a brood of vipers, a den of snakes. That didn't go over well, as you can imagine. They felt people should be from the proper lineage—from the family of our ancestor

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Abraham. I mocked the religious leaders when I pointed to a pile of rocks and said that God could raise children of Abraham from those stones. My point was, God's family was not based on our lineage or proper religious practices, but upon God's forgiveness when we turn around our lives.

Some began thinking I was the Messiah, but I refused this title. My people had been dreaming for centuries of the Messiah, the Anointed One who would come and free us from the captivity of foreign rulers. We dreamed of a ruler from the lineage of King David who would lead us once again with peace and justice. I said I wasn't the Messiah, but one greater than I would come. I was just the messenger, the one crying in the wilderness to prepare for something wonderful to happen. I was trying to get people ready, for I sensed that change was in the air.

I assume you already know the person I'm talking about, but let's hear what happened next at the Jordan River.

***(Worship leader reads Matthew 3:13-17)***

When I baptized Jesus in the water, I felt he might be the One we were waiting for. As he came out of the water, I saw a dove fluttering above him, and it seemed as though the Spirit of God hovered over Jesus' head. And then I thought my ears were playing tricks on me as I heard a mysterious voice say, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I thought maybe his father, Joseph, was in the crowd and had yelled the words, but when I looked around, I couldn't find Jesus' father. I asked others if they had seen Joseph that day, but no one remembered seeing him.

I knew that my baptism of Jesus was something extraordinary, but it wasn't until I observed him teaching the crowds that I began to understand that he was more than just my cousin. When I heard all the things that Jesus was doing and saying, I sent messengers to ask him, "Are you the One we've been waiting for?"<sup>3</sup>

Jesus sent a reply messenger: "Look what I'm doing: healing the sick, helping people see and

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hear, and giving good news to those who are poor.  
What do you think, John?"

I think I already knew the answer, but I had to ask. I wanted to hear from Jesus who he thought he was, but rather than a direct answer he invited me to see what amazing things he was doing.

I could see God's presence in Jesus through what he was doing. How might people today see God's presence in you?

What are some of the things your congregation does to reflect God's presence?

*(Pause for comments)*

When you entered the waters of baptism, just like Jesus, God reminded you that you are part of God's family. I am delighted to know that God's work continues through all of you.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:4.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:18-23.