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As we begin this New Year, I wondered how we might start off the year in a different way. I think all of us are ready for a change, for something different, for last year was full of chaos and unsettledness. As I read the beginning of Luke's Gospel during Christmas, I was comforted by the familiar story of Jesus' birth: the surprising announcement to Mary that she was expecting a child, the trip to Bethlehem where she gave birth and placed the baby in a bed of hay, the visit of the shepherds, the dedication of Jesus in the temple where Simeon and Anna praised God, and a brief story about Jesus as a young boy talking with the priests in the temple. In all the chaos of the year, there's something comforting in these familiar stories—a reminder that no matter what happens, God's story offers the same comforting words of hope.

Intertwined with these familiar stories is the story of another amazing birth: John the Baptist, born to Elizabeth who was told she could not have children. After the birth of John and Jesus, Luke didn't spend much time telling baby stories, for he jumped immediately to their ministry as adults. Last

year you may recall that we had a visit from John the Baptizer, who gave himself the nickname J.B. I invited him to return again this year, but due to COVID, he was not able to make the journey in person, but he did offer to chat with us online. J.B., are you with us?

J.B. Yes, I'm here. Thanks for inviting me back. It's such a joy to tell my story, for I'm often overlooked. I'm sandwiched between the birth stories of Jesus and the story of his baptism, so my story sometimes gets lost.

Doug: Even here at the beginning of Epiphany, it's easy to miss your story once again. We get all excited about the magi visiting the baby Jesus, which marks the beginning of Epiphany on January 6, and then we jump to Jesus' baptism. You had a major role in that event, isn't that right?

J.B. Yes, I did. I had been living in the wilderness and inviting people to the river to repent, to turn around and to seek forgiveness. I took to heart the words of the prophet Isaiah who hundreds of years earlier had envisioned a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. He spoke about valleys being filled and mountains being leveled out, about how crooked paths would be made straight and the

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rough ways made smooth. Many saw my work fitting that description.

Doug: Those are powerful images. Mountains leveled? Crooked paths made straight? How did that imagery speak to you?

J.B. There was a lot of unhappiness in my time with the oppression of the Roman government, and I saw how much my people desired change. I wanted to straighten out some of those crooked paths that I saw in the people around me. Over the years Rome had conquered more and more land, eventually including the land of Judea where I lived.<sup>1</sup> When I was born, King Herod ruled the land, but he died when I was a child, and his three sons divided the land between them. The son that ruled our portion of land lasted only ten years, and the Roman overlords threw him out and replaced him with a military governor, Pontius Pilate. He built a temple in honor of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, elevating the Emperor to divine status! We considered that sacrilegious, for we could not recognize any political ruler as a god!

Doug: I imagine that was quite shocking to your people, who devoted themselves to worshiping only God. Sometimes political leaders get too full of themselves, which we have seen recently in our own time. As the votes were to be confirmed this past week for our new incoming President, a large mob of people attacked the Capitol, violently breaking through doors and windows and dishonoring this sacred place. Some have suggested that our current President encouraged such behavior through his words, but regardless, the mob committed violence that is inexcusable.

J.B. I guess I thought times would have changed over the past 2000 years. Even though you see Jesus as the Messiah, you still long for a better world just as we did.

Doug: Your people had been waiting a long time for a Messiah. What did that mean to you?

J.B. The word *Messiah* literally means the “anointed one.” When we chose kings, we anointed them with oil as a sign of God’s blessing. Throughout our history we had so many nations invade our land and take over leadership, that we longed for an anointed one to come and set the world right, to

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free us from invading armies. While we waited, I invited people to change their own ways, to take straight paths and to ask for forgiveness when they failed. It's always easy to blame others, like the government, but I challenged people to change their *own* ways. Walking into the water was a symbolic way of seeking cleansing and forgiveness.

Doug: While you were doing this, Jesus happened to come to the river for baptism, didn't he?

J.B. Yes, he did, and I baptized him along with all the others seeking forgiveness.

Doug: Many today wonder why Jesus was baptized, for we can't imagine him needing forgiveness.

J.B. Entering those waters meant so much more. It was also a way of affirming one's desire to follow God, to make crooked paths straight. I've thought a lot about that day over the years, and I think Jesus wanted to remind us that he stood with us, that together we could straighten the crooked ways of the world.

Doug: That's a powerful message for us today, for even though the world remains a place of chaos, we can find moments of joy, times of peace. That doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing, for there's always something left to do.

J.B. I think that's what baptism is all about—a reminder that God cleanses us every day and invites us to try again when we fail. Even though the world isn't a perfect place, God was with us and continues to be with all of you.

Doug: Thanks so much J.B. for being with us again this year. Maybe your words of wisdom can help us straighten out some of the crooked paths that we encounter this year.

J.B. My pleasure. Always good to hear how that the life of Jesus continues to impact the world.

Doug: I invite all of us to think of crooked places in the world, paths that we could help straighten. Each of us through our baptism is invited to participate in making the world a better place, one day at a time.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Jews and the Roman Empire," [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/jews.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/jews.html)