

“Making the Paths Straight”

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Text: Matthew 3:1-12

I always wonder about John the Baptist, with all of his rage, crying out in the wilderness, wrapped in camel's hair, eating locusts, warning of a fiery judgment. How did he get there? What formed this prophet? Why was he calling the priests a brood of vipers? I imagine how it happened.

Before John became *John the Baptist*, he was formed in Elizabeth's womb. At the same time, Zechariah, John's father and a priest, fell silent. John's massive lungs knit together in Elizabeth's belly, while Zechariah's words turned to breath. The son's vocal cords developed with the bravado of rolling thunder and the menace of a furious bear, all while the comforting muttering of his father faded into inaudible whispers.

It began when the priest, Zechariah, drew the lot that indicated he would be the one to enter the Holy of Holies to sacrifice the incense. Zechariah stood before the altar, mumbling the prayers and fanning the flames in order to get the sparks to catch. As the fire died out, the embers filled the air with smoldering perfume, and tears brimmed Zechariah's eyes. Through his rippled vision, he sensed a presence, then a shadow appeared to the right of the Altar. Zechariah drew in a startled breath.

No one was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies except the High priest, once a year. Zechariah looked down at his robes, adorned with a rope, bells, and dried-out pomegranates. They constructed the garb so that if the priest was unworthy and fell down dead, the other priests would hear the tinkling bells and rattling pomegranates. Even if they knew that he was dead on the ground, they still wouldn't enter to collect his body; instead, they would pull Zechariah's limp flesh and bones out with the rope.

A voice, as deep as the oceans, rumbled from the smoke as the shadow spoke, “Don't be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will name him John... he will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Elizabeth couldn't have a child when she was young, and now she was too old. So even with Gabriel's massive presence filling the temple, the rumble of his message, and the smell of Zechariah's own fear overwhelming the incense, Zechariah grew incredulous. “How will I know that this is so?” He asked the messenger. “For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

As Zechariah demanded solid proof, when his hardened cynicism escaped from his mouth, the words dissipated with the smoke. He felt as if he swallowed smoldering air, and it caught in his throat somehow. He tried to cough, to loosen up his voice, but the only thing that came out

was a wheezing and a choking sound. When the air cleared, Zechariah saw the fiery impatience flashing in Gabriel's ancient eyes. He tried to swallow, but a lump formed along with the dryness. "I am Gabriel," the messenger said as the altar of incense shook. "I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Then, Gabriel vanished along with Zechariah's tongue.

Elizabeth did bear John in her old age. And when that baby cried out, with a voice that could fill a wilderness, his father got his voice back as well.

I imagine John, as a child, running in the temple. He would enter the courtyard, bursting with energy. His tenor shook the columns before Zechariah even knew to quiet him. I'm sure the other priests gave John scolding looks, but John descended from the tribe of Levi, the tribe of priests. His mother *and* his father were descendant of Aaron, which made his future in the temple secure.

But John never fit in the temple. I imagine John trying to be there, as a teenager. Each the priests prayed, something in John's gut turned sour. John could discern every hypocritical bone in their body. He noticed how the older men avoided eye contact and shrank with shame in his presence. John watched the men prayed their vacuous words, while their actions betrayed their piety every day. They ate, filling themselves at banquets, while they let people go hungry. The priests dressed up in their finery while widows wore rags.

Then, one day, John heard the clanking of metal in the courtyard. John knew the sound well and his skin prickled on the back of his neck as he began to sweat. He forced himself to stay planted as the Roman soldiers entered the Temple, along with the Governor. John knew what the soldiers did to keep the Jewish people under their rule. They enslaved children, raped women, and lined their streets with the corpses of men who dared to question the Emperor. A man could be going about his business, and these soldiers would ask for the very clothes off his back, and he had to give it to them, without question. The soldiers were vile and they desecrated this holy place. John hid in the shadows, peering from behind the pillars, watching for the conflict to come. John expected the priests to spit in the soldier's faces and throw the men out of the temple!

Yet when the soldiers and the priests came face to face, something odd happened. It was not what John imagined at all. The priests patted the politicians on their back, with gregarious warmth. John couldn't believe his eyes and he wondered if the priests could be setting a trap. Then John watched in horror as the men ate and planned together. They lifted glasses of wine and drank to life. The priests gave advice about how to rule in certain situations. The priests explained how to befriend, subdue, and punish. Then, the priests informed the soldiers of any possible uprisings or rebellions.

John watched as long as he could, mainly because he couldn't believe that it was happening. The religious leaders were turning in their own people to their oppressors. John ran from the temple. Perhaps, on his way out, John ran into Zechariah, and with furious tears, John told his father what he had seen. Zechariah looked at John with such sad resignation and guilt, that John

knew that what he saw was true—the priests were aiding Rome. John became so furious with his father that he wanted to turn over tables.

Zechariah explained that the priests were protecting the Temple. It took so long for them to rebuild it after the Babylonians destroyed it. And so far, Rome had allowed the Temple to stand. The priests understood that Caesar could destroy all that they had built, with a quick command, and so they cooperated with Rome. As Zechariah's words tumbled out, they were tinny and hollow with hypocrisy.

John cursed and ran. He might have been born into a priestly role, and he might have been carrying the weight of Isaiah's prophecy, but he could not bear the corruption of the Temple. His voice took on an animal groaning, as he headed into the wilderness, because he knew he could no longer find God in a building. The priests had taken that away from him.

Eventually, John found himself on the edge of the River Jordan. He cried out in agony, yelling at his father, the priests, and God. John was furious that such hypocrisy had consumed the temple. So, he stripped off his ceremonial linen robes and waded into the water and broke down in loud sobs, feeling the betrayal of his father in his bones. He would no longer partake in the purification rituals. Instead John tried to wash himself from all the lies that had fed him, the hypocrisy that nurtured him for so many years.

John hated putting the linen robes back on, so he eventually used camel's skin. And he ate locusts. The creatures were cursed for the Jewish people. Not unclean—because who else would have eaten them? Why bother putting them on a list of forbidden foods? But they were a part of the plagues that freed the children of Abraham and Sarah from slavery. Locusts devoured the land before one deliverer, Moses. So, John would devour the locusts, in preparation for another deliverer. When he spent a whole night, with an irritated throat, coughing as he tried to sleep on the hard ground, he found some honey.

John created a movement there, in the wilderness. In that space, there were no offerings that separated the rich and the poor. There was an offering of oneself. There were no purification rituals that were out of reach for those who could not afford them. There was baptism, which was open to all. There was no women's courtyard, or places where women were not allowed to go. And there, John spoke freely against Rome. The prophesy reverberated in John's bones. He woke with Isaiah's words on the edge of his teeth and they never left them. He prepared the hearts and minds of his people for the Messiah, calling out the hypocrisy that so entangled their lives that they couldn't even see straight any longer.

My friends, John's voice calls to us. So much has changed and so much has stayed the same. We look the other way as religious leaders spew hypocrisy and make deals for power. We are still making backroom deals in order to protect institutions, buildings, and endowments. The axe is at the root of the tree. And yet, this is a time when we can prepare our hearts and minds for Christ. John calls out for an end to the corruption and betrayal. He calls for people to change their ways. He is making the path straight for Jesus. And his voice still calls out to us.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.