

*Please join us and invite others to join us
for these Advent services:*

Children's Christmas Program — December 20 at 9:00 worship.

Blue Christmas Service — On December 21 we will gather in the Chapel at 7:00 PM for a special "Blue Christmas" worship service. This is a service of remembrance dedicated to bringing healing and hope to those experiencing grief and loss during the holiday season.

Christmas Eve Worship — On December 24 we will gather for three worship services. Here are the details:

- 1:30 PM — Children's Christmas Eve Service
 - This service is designed and intended for families with younger children.
- 4:00 and 6:00 PM — Traditional Christmas Eve Service
 - This is our traditional candlelight service.

Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service — On December 31 we will gather at 7:00 PM to celebrate John Wesley's traditional service of covenant renewal. This worship service sets our hearts and souls to walk faithfully throughout 2021.

You are also invited to join us beginning January 10th for a New Year's worship series called "Created Anew".

This worship series looks at the new year as an opportunity to begin anew through resolutions, hopes, dreams, and our faith. Join us to explore and discover what it looks like and means to be a Christian living in the world today.

"Where We Belong"

An Advent Devotional for 2020



Grace United Methodist Church

*Devotional by John Birch
Adapted by Pastor John*

Original Devotional:
At That Time

An Advent Bible Study
by John Birch

(Using the readings for Year B of the Revised RCL)
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Notes and Thoughts:

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The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) is a three-year cycle of weekly lections used to varying degrees by the vast majority of mainline Protestant churches in the UK, US, and Canada.

Readings for the Advent Season vary through this cycle, and therefore it seems a good idea to have a Bible study which compliments the readings for each of these years.

The studies follow the same pattern - introductory questions to stimulate discussion, a look at two or three of the set readings, key verses, some notes to act as an aid to understanding and a series of questions to open up the text to discussion within the group. Prayers to open or close the meeting are also included.

Adapted by Pastor John for Grace United Methodist Church.

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(More prayers for Advent and Christmas can be found at www.faithandworship.com)

STUDY 1: A HOPE

November 29-December 5

STARTERS

Question 1: As you look forward in your life, what's the next milestone that you are aiming for?

Question 2: How organized are you when planning holidays? Do you start at the turn of the year, act on impulse or plan from one year to the next?

Question 3: As you look forward into Advent during this uncertain time, where do you need to find hope?

INTRODUCTION

So here we are at the beginning of Advent, the continuation of a tradition stretching back to at least the 6th century (although there are some references to fasts and celebrations at this time of year from 4th century writings).

Advent is an anglicized version of the Latin word *adventus*, meaning 'coming', and *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *Parousia*, commonly used to refer to the Second Coming of Christ. For Christians, the season of Advent looks to the coming of Christ from two different perspectives. The season offers the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, and also wait in expectation for his Second Coming in glory.

READING THE WORD

Read Mark 13:24-37 and 1st Corinthians 1:3-9

KEY VERSES:

Mark 13:26-27, 32-33

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come...”

1st Corinthians 1:7-9

“Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

THE CONTEXT

We cannot ignore what’s gone on before in this chapter when our passage begins, ‘But in those days, following that distress...!’

The whole chapter is entitled ‘Signs of the End of the Age’ and in the first twenty-three verses Mark has Jesus talking about the total destruction of the temple in Jerusalem that he and his disciples have walked out from.

For your word which endures
We give you thanks
For your promises to which we hold
We give you thanks
For such intimacy with you

We give you thanks
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies
We give you thanks
For those gathered here today

We give you thanks
For family, friend and stranger
We give you thanks
For those who minister your grace

We give you thanks
For the hope that lives each Advent
of a love that has no end
We give you thanks, Amen.

Teach us obedience, Lord
 in every part of our lives,
 Ears to hear your word,
 hands to do your work,
 feet to walk your path,
 a heart for all your people,
 a mouth to shout your praise,
 a childlike faith.

Humility.
 Confidence,
 that says
 to the possible
 and the impossible
 I am the Lord's servant,
 may it be to me as you have said.
 Amen.

—

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
 be the love that dwells between us.
 God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
 be the peace that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
 be the joy that dwells between us.
 God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
 be the center, the focus of our lives
 always, and particularly this Advent time.

This is Herod's Temple, a magnificent example of the ancient builders' skills, constructed from massive carved stones, made to last!

He then talks of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecution, family against family and something he calls 'the abomination that causes desolation' that is the cue for the population to flee to the mountains. If that were not enough, false prophets will appear and deceive the believers. So, they are to be on their guard, having been forewarned! The key points seem to be:

- a) Don't trust in things made by human hands,
- b) Hold on to the Truth
- c) Be watchful.

JESUS AS PROPHET

Christians might feel a little uncomfortable with labelling Jesus as a prophet, because we are keen to see a difference between him and the likes of John the Baptist. Jesus is Messiah, the Savior, the one toward whom so many of the ancient prophets pointed. But God sees the Big Picture, and therefore in times such as this Jesus felt it was important to say what he saw in the future. Interestingly, the one thing he was unable to prophesy was his own return (verse 32 of our reading in Mark). Mark is the earliest of the Gospel writers at about 66-74 C.E., and so he may well have been writing about things he knew had already come to fruition. Not long after Jesus' death the Parthians were threatening the frontiers of the Roman Empire, an earthquake had devastated Laodicea, Vesuvius had erupted and there were severe famines as near as Syria during the reign of Claudius. Tacitus, writing his history commented that the gods must be taking vengeance on the Roman Empire.

Then we have the destruction of Jerusalem, following the chaotic succession of four Roman Emperors and considerable Jewish unrest and infighting, forcing many Jews to leave the city. It was a four-year war which culminated in 70 C.E. during Passover when Titus laid siege to Jerusalem, starving into submission those inside who had not fled. Around 97,000 were taken prisoner, many to die in the arena, and the number of corpses inside the city was estimated to be 115,000.

LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD

Within this chapter Mark has Jesus looking to the immediate future where there will be conflict, disasters and persecution of believers. Now his gaze moves onward from the momentous low of Jerusalem's destruction, to the amazing peak of Jesus' Second Coming – A real shaking of the universe!

Verses 26-27 refer to a vision in Daniel Chapter 7 (read it if you have time) where four kingdoms, represented by beasts, are replaced by 'one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven' who is led into the presence of the Ancient of Days and given power and authority.

All nations will worship him, and his kingdom will never be destroyed. Jesus doesn't specifically link himself with this son of man, we're left to decide based upon Mark's account.

The rest of the chapter is predominantly about being watchful, and also patient. Bearing in mind those prophecies fulfilled in the immediate future and those which were to come, verse 30, which talks about the present generation seeing all this happen causes commentators some problems. The most straightforward explanation is that it refers to the prophecies relating to that time and particularly the destruction of

Heaven touching earth,
the footsteps of the divine
walking dusty roads
as once they did in Eden,
and a people,
searching for a Savior
and walking past
the stable.

Open eyes and hearts,
that this might be
an Advent of hope to the world.

Lord God, you choose the very least
And raise us up to greatness
For nothing is impossible with God
You take the weak, the poor and blind
And raise us out of darkness
For nothing is impossible with God
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of gods.
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords.
His love endures forever.

PRAYERS AT THE BEGINNING OR END

In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in unity,
that our praise and worship
might echo in these walls
and also through our lives.

In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in mission,
that the hope within
might be the song we sing
and the melody of our lives.

In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in service,
that the path we follow
might lead us from a stable
to a glimpse of eternity.

The Advent story
of hope and mystery,
anticipation,
preparation,
a kingdom
of this world and the next,
and a king
appearing when we least expect.

Jerusalem, because in the next sentence Jesus goes on to say that no one except the Father knows when the Second Coming will happen.

In these times, some look to the “end of the world” thoughts as the pandemic continues on and as our world becomes more and more of a mess. Into all of this, God speaks a word of hope that allows us to keep or stand firm until the end. We trust that God has a plan. May we trust in him with hope as our hearts begin this Advent journey!

DISCUSSION

Question 1: If you had one word to describe what Advent is all about, what would it be?

Question 2: How challenging do you find this theme at the beginning of Advent, and why? How is this year different?

Question 3: Do you detect a feeling of urgency in Jesus’ words? Is that sense of urgency still in the church today, or have its priorities changed?

Question 4: Every generation includes Christians who interpret the signs of their age as meaning that Jesus’ Second Coming is imminent. Is this what we should be doing? Why or why not?

Question 5: What might Jesus’ instruction to be watchful mean for our generation?

Question 6: Just prior to our reading Jesus warned about false prophets appearing and deceiving believers. Who might be the false prophets of this age?

Question 7: Should this yearly reminder at Advent, to look beyond the nativity scene and consider things eternal with its warnings of persecution and struggle for believers, affect the way we look at the mission of our church, and if so in what way?

Question 8: What does verse 27 tell you about God's ultimate plan? Might we be a part of this?

Question 9: The use of the term 'his (God's) elect' in verse 27 causes problems to many in that it presupposes that God has already chosen those who will be saved (predestination). An alternative viewpoint is that this is a typical Jewish way of talking about all those who would believe the gospel, echoed in John Wesley's famous four 'Alls'; 'All need to be saved - All may be saved - All may know that they are saved - All may be saved to the uttermost.' How do you feel about this?

Question 10: What reassurance does 1 Corinthians 3:7-9 offer us when faced with the warnings in Mark's words?

Close in prayer. (There are some at the back of the book.)

Question 11: As we wait now on the threshold of Christmas, how are you waiting with excitement and anticipation? How are you still preparing to welcome the guest?

Close in prayer. (There are some at the back of the book.)

Question 4: How guilty are Christians generally of trying to constrain God between four walls on a Sunday?

Question 5: What is your view of kingship today? How much power does a contemporary king or queen have compared to those in our history books? How would you view a kingship that had no end?

Question 6: We talk of God's kingdom and pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' every week in worship. Do we think of Jesus as king? What difference does that make to our feelings about him?

Question 7: How does the angel reassure and encourage Mary in Luke 1:28-31? Is this a model that we could use, and if so in what situations?

Question 8: Read again the angel's response to Mary in Luke 1:37. What should that mean for us today?

Question 9: Do we get discouraged by all the paraphernalia that surrounds Christmas these days, with its demands to minimize the real story for fear of upsetting sections of society? Should Christians have a louder voice at this time of year, and where should that come from?

Question 10: What can you as a disciple do to encourage those outside to engage with the truth, mystery and wonder of the Christmas story?

STUDY 2: A MESSAGE

December 6-12

STARTERS

Question 1: Supermarkets and stores begin marketing their Christmas and Advent products from September. Does this do anything to increase the feeling of anticipation for the season, help spread the financial load or simply annoy you?

Question 2: How difficult is it to maintain the picture of the birth of Jesus in humble surroundings when faced with blatant consumerism and children being tempted by images of expensive toys? Is there anything Christian parents can do to 'earth' the season in a simpler way that would also satisfy their children?

INTRODUCTION

The word gospel means 'good news' (as it is often translated) in the context of an important historical event. Mark starts his gospel by rooting it into history. John the Baptist, Jesus and all those we read about are part of history, not a story. We can ignore history, but we can't erase it.

It had been 400 years since the last recognized prophet, Malachi, and the people were desperate for God to act again. They were looking for Messiah, and they got John the Baptist! This week's Lectionary readings are still looking toward the Second Coming but now focusing as well on the preparation for Jesus' appearance, not as a baby but grown up and ready to begin his earthly ministry.

READING THE WORD

Read Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8, and 2 Peter 3:8-15

KEY VERSES:

Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Mark 1:4-8

"And so, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the River Jordan. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'"

The passage from 2 Samuel is worth reading in its entirety. David wanted to build a house for God (after all, the pagan gods had temples) but God turns this round and says he will build a house for David, through a child who will establish his throne forever. Rather than be pinned down to a place and time, God would live in the midst of his people, unconstrained by walls made by human hands! Even so, humanity has always sought to build 'houses' for God. Yet God just wants to dwell in our hearts.

And so Mary becomes a temporary dwelling place for this child who will be both king and Son of God (Luke 1:31,32) because all the fullness of God will dwell within him and be expressed through his life.

DISCUSSION

Question 1: Although in the story Mary is not specifically asked if she is willing to be of service to God, her response is acknowledged before the angel departs. Have members of the group experienced a call or urging to do something specific for God and if so, was the response an easy or difficult one to make?

Question 2: How easy do you find it to see within passages such as that we've looked at in 2 Samuel, echoes of the coming and mission of Jesus?

Question 3: Why do you think Luke and the other gospel writers wanted to suggest a connection between the ancient scriptures and Jesus?

MARY'S OBEDIENCE

Mary's reaction to the news from the angel is worth considering. Reassured that she had no need to be afraid (a natural reaction!) there was just one important question that needed to be answered – How could this possibly happen? - before Mary humbly declared that she was the servant of God and was willing for this to happen as the angel had described. The news that her cousin Elizabeth was also to be blessed with a child was no doubt an added assurance that this was all part of God's bigger picture for his people.

BORN TO BE A KING

Throughout the Bible we find strands coming together as fulfilment of prophecies or pronouncements made generations previously. This child will have an earthly father in Joseph who is a descendant of David, and in 2 Samuel 7:16 we hear God's word telling David that 'Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever.'

The child will also be called Jesus, which literally means 'God saves.'

Luke seems bent on making a political statement. God had promised David a descendant whose reign would be eternal, but also in some sense be God's son (2 Samuel 7:14). So here we have a child to be born who is associated with Israel's greatest king and identified with God himself. The inference is that this will be a king and a reign that is greater than any other in this world, certainly far greater than Caesar under whose rule the people were living.

2 Peter 3:8

"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

THE CONTEXT

Each year Jews celebrate and retell the story of the Exodus, their historical rescue from Egypt and subsequent journey to a promised land. After Creation this has been the most important story in their history, together with a belief that God would make the Exodus story happen again. But this time it would be different, God's Spirit would be in his people's hearts rather than appearing as a pillar of cloud and fire. He would be their God, and they would be his people.

The prophet Malachi had said that Elijah would appear before the Messiah, 'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes' (Malachi 4:5) and now in the desert appears a prophetic figure dressed in a similar manner to Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), living a simple life and with such a startling message. One commentator equates it to tipping a bucket of cold water over the head of someone having an afternoon sleep!

AN ANCIENT PROPHECY?

Mark tells us that the verses he quotes come from Isaiah, but that's not exactly true. What he seems to have done is take 3 passages from Isaiah, Malachi and Exodus and combined them together under the name of the most well-known of the prophets. Mark's is a compact gospel and maybe he is more interested in getting the message across than taking up expensive parchment with extra words!

LOCATION

John appears at a boundary between East and West in the Roman Empire. It's a significant historical location. Lot chose the Plain of Jordan (Genesis 13); Jacob crossed the Jordan given the opportunity (Genesis 32); Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan to a promised land (Joshua 3) and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha focused on the Jordan.

JEWS AND BAPTISM

Jewish life involved a lot of ritual washing as they understood the spiritual significance of cleansing, but baptism was for Gentiles and converts to Judaism. To be told that they needed to go through the waters of repentance in the Jordan was quite a shock as it indicated that their outward show of religion was actually a hindrance to their readiness to welcome the Messiah. But here was an Elijah-like John speaking with real authority. After 400 years of waiting for God to act they were inclined to believe that this might be God's will. As a result, we are told that many people from the surrounding countryside and Jerusalem travelled to the Jordan to hear John.

A MYSTERY REVEALED

Although we read this as purely an encounter between Mary and the angel, there are several strands of a nation's history and prophetic memory coming together in this moment. Paul, at the conclusion to his letter to Romans tries to sum up the mystery of the ancient scriptures colliding with the present in the person of Jesus – eternity invading time and God appearing to humankind, a gospel message that is not just for one nation but for all nations and all people, revealed through the light that is now shining through the ancient scriptures into the present moment, revealing Jesus to be the way in which God would once again bring his people from captivity into a new and promised kingdom. This kingdom is one where God in Jesus dwells both with us and within us. Jesus the Messiah came to dwell for a time in Mary; Christ seeks to take up residence in our hearts now and forevermore.

The biggest mystery of all is of course that of the virgin birth, a stumbling block to many both outside and inside the church (and not an essential doctrine in some denominations). Luke and Matthew are in full agreement here about truth of this miracle. We know Luke to be a good historian who would be sure of his facts, and this is the literal interpretation of the text. The apostle Paul doesn't mention the virgin birth in his letters, and some suggest that as Jews considered God's Spirit to be present in every conception and birth that it is enough to believe that God's Spirit acted in a very special and beautiful way in Mary and Joseph's life. We are left to make up our own minds.

READING THE WORD

Read Luke 1:26-38, 2nd Samuel 7:1-11 and 16, and Romans 16:25-27

KEY VERSES

Luke 1:35-38

“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.’ ‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.”

2 Samuel 7:16

“Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”

Romans 16: 25-27

“Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus

John was baptizing with water, but the one to come would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. This dual baptism can be seen in the context of Pentecost (Acts 2) and also Paul’s words in Romans 8:5-11. In the wilderness John called people “home” - back into right relationship with God. He let them know that there was work to be done and invited them to be “cleaned up” by the waters of baptism that followed confession and repentance.

In Isaiah 40, the valleys are lifted up and the hills laid low, all to prepare the way of the Lord. Like John’s call to clean the soul, Isaiah’s words speak of cleaning or clearing the way for the Lord. Today, the church and many Christian organizations continue the work of preparing hearts for a relationship with Jesus. This week, you are invited to do the work of invitation and to do the work of preparing our space – both physical as well as spiritual – to welcome guests who accept the invitation to join us on our journey with Christ.

PATIENCE

The people had been waiting 400 years, and although they flock to see John, he tells them that they have to wait a little longer. They have got to be patient!

Patience is one of the themes of the Bible, as Peter reminds his readers, and throughout the Psalms we see the writer’s struggle to understand that God’s answers to his prayers are sometimes delayed until the timing is right. ‘How long, O Lord?’ he cries in Psalm 13, but ends ‘But I trust in your unfailing love...’

DISCUSSION

Question 1: Can you suggest why Mark might have chosen to begin his gospel not with Mary, Joseph or the birth of Jesus but around thirty years later?

Question 2: If you were wanting to disseminate good news today would there be better ways to get the message out? Who can you give an invitation card to? How will you do this?

Question 3: Location and timing were important for this part of our story. How carefully does the church consider these and other factors when planning mission or mission-related events, and could they sometimes be more effectively held somewhere other than within the church building?

Question 4: John's message about cleaning up lives was predominantly about repentance, telling the people that ritual washing was not enough if their lives were not right with God. Repentance was at the heart of Jesus' message in the same chapter of Mark's gospel. Are we sometimes guilty of thinking that our weekly prayer of confession in church is enough to keep us on the straight and narrow?

Question 5: It has been said that John the Baptist lived the message he preached, and this helped people connect to what he was saying. How easy do we find it to live the message we confess?

Question 6: Why do we sometimes need to be patient in our praying?

STUDY 4: A SERVANT

December 20-26

STARTERS

Question 1: Is the true message of Christmas still being heard outside of our churches, or has it been blunted by political correctness into something else?

Question 2: We're used to the picture of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary. There is continuing belief in angels today, and indeed angels ministering to people. How does the group feel about this?

INTRODUCTION

Luke's story of Mary's encounter with the angel is full of wonder and mystery. It is also the story of a vulnerable young girl and her humility and obedience to God's will for her life. We have reached more familiar ground in the build up to the Christmas celebrations, and just as the birth of Jesus takes place in humble surroundings so we find in an ordinary small town the one to whom God is entrusting a very special task. It's worth noting that of course this wasn't a random choice, both Matthew and Luke point out that Joseph could trace his ancestry back through King David to Adam!

Question 9: Paul gives the Thessalonians a model for those who are waiting for Jesus' return, summed up very neatly in his concluding words. How would that fit as a mission statement for a church today, and could we live up to it?

Question 10: John was all about the message, in a world which was not expecting Messiah to come as a baby. Can today's world still relate to that nativity scene, and is it acceptable to try and make the story more 'relevant' as some have done with the message of Easter?

Question 11: How do you celebrate Christmas within your family and church?

Close in prayer. (There are some at the back of the book.)

Question 7: John's message was a shock to the system for his listeners. What do we look for in the preaching of our clergy and preachers, comfort or challenge?

Question 8: Should the mainstream denominations put more emphasis on baptism with the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers?

Question 9: What are the real needs in our community? In your neighborhood? In your family? In your school? At your workplace? As another Advent season comes around, how easy is it to 'prepare the way' for Jesus?

Question 10: For many people, particularly families on low income, Christmas can be a really stressful time. How might churches respond to this? How might our church respond?

Close in prayer. (There are some at the back of the book.)

STUDY 3: A WITNESS

December 13-19

STARTERS

Question 1: Have you ever felt a 'call' or strong conviction to do something, go somewhere, be with someone? How would you describe that feeling?

Question 2: If you had a simple plea for the society in which you live, what would it be?

Question 3: Where do you (or one you love) most need God's healing touch to bring healing or wholeness to your life?

INTRODUCTION

We're still looking at John the Baptist in our journey through Advent, but here we are made well aware of his role, simply as a witness to 'the true light' coming into the world. John was a bit of a puzzle to the religious hierarchy with their long-held beliefs about who would be the forerunner to the Messiah, and both John the Baptist and John the Evangelist are eager to put the record straight.

It might just be worth reminding ourselves of John's background, highlighted in Luke's gospel. Born to an elderly priest, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth after the intervention of God's Spirit, John was destined for a specific mission, '...to bring many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God' and in the spirit of Elijah '...make ready a people prepared for the

Question 3: Jesus is referred to as 'the light' coming into the world, so how would you explain the significance of this title? John pointed to Jesus. He pointed beyond self. How do we do this at Christmas? During the rest of the year?

Question 4: How do the luminaries in church and in your homes, the signs in some of our yards, and the invite cards we have given out bear witness to our faith and invite others into faith and into our church family?

Question 5: Why do you think John the Baptist is considered a model of Christian witness?

Question 6: John essentially challenged the established view of how the Messiah would appear, which was based upon a particular reading of scripture. Are we open to the idea of our own theological viewpoints being challenged and changed, and if so where do we draw the line?

Question 7: John came as 'a witness' to testify (v.7) which conjures up an image of law courts, and yet this is precisely what Christians are asked to be (Acts 1:8). How can we be effective witnesses for Jesus?

Question 8: John hinted that although he was not Messiah, that person was living among them as yet unrevealed (v.26). How do we recognize God at work in our families, local communities or even nationally?

A REMINDER

In the previous studies we were cautioned to keep our eyes open and be watchful. Alongside this one could add a desire to strengthen faith when times are getting more difficult, whilst looking forward to a glorious age to come. In which case, Paul's words to the Thessalonians seem quite pertinent. At the end of his first letter he commends them to:

- (a) Rejoice always,
- (b) Pray continuously,
- (c) Give thanks in all circumstances,
- (d) Use the gifts of the Spirit,
- (e) Be open to the word of God being preached,
- (f) Live the life that they profess.

Bishop Tom Wright adds, 'We are to pray, dance and be holy, for tomorrow we live!'

DISCUSSION

Question 1: John the Baptist had his own disciples and there is evidence that many revered him more highly than he would have liked. It can happen that a great preacher becomes far more influential than the message they preach. How can this be avoided?

Question 2: How would people react today to a rather unconventional 'John the Baptist' figure attracting large crowds and challenging the religious establishment?

Lord' (Luke 1: 15-17).

John was calling the people out of their own brokenness and back to wholeness, back to a right relationship with God.

READING THE WORD

Read Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11, John 1:6-8 and 19-28, and 1st Thessalonians 5:16-24

KEY VERSES

Isaiah 61:11

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8 and 19-20

"There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.... Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'"

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”

JOHN THE PROBLEM

This gospel gives no indication of the success John was having in gathering a crowd to take on board his call for an outward show of repentance through baptism in the Jordan. Yet this would be a cause of concern for the authorities because although born to a priestly family, John had not gone through any formal training. His whole approach to ministry, though successful, was totally unorthodox. But people could see God working in and through him. It was important therefore to establish if John was indeed the Messiah, or at the least one of the hoped-for prophets Jews believed would appear at that time such as Elijah or Moses. They had to tick the boxes! John assures those who question him that he is not the Messiah, or indeed the prophet Elijah (Malachi 4:5 has God saying, ‘See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes...’)

He was also not Moses, ‘the Prophet’ expected by many Jews, which could be construed from Deuteronomy 18:15 which says, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.’

No, John insists he is simply a voice calling in the desert (see Isaiah 40:3), a witness to the light which was coming into the world. Isaiah 61 also points towards Jesus Christ. Isaiah speaks of garments of salvation, the righteousness of salvation, and of the bride and bridegroom – all words that connect to Jesus. God will one day cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. John called his generation to return to right living. How do you hear that call echoing in your life these days?

JOHN THE THREAT

The religious hierarchy would certainly feel a little threatened, worried that John was undermining their position in society, particularly with regard to baptizing Jews. They would more easily accept a prophet such as Ezekiel returning and baptizing (Ezekiel 36:25) than the unorthodox John performing this rite. What made it seem all wrong was that baptism at the hands of man was for Gentiles, and incomers from other faiths and not for God’s chosen people. An Israelite was never baptized, he already belonged to God.

John was suggesting that a veneer of religion was not enough, and even the chosen people needed to go through the waters of baptism alongside Gentiles.