



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Advent, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

St. John the Baptist, the subject of today's Gospel reading, is an exotic, but elusive character, who tends to receive short shrift from clergy and scriptural scholars. In Bible movies, he rates only a bit part -- appearing either as a gibbering, half-naked mystic or as a gory, disembodied head served up on a silver platter.

John didn't leaving any writings behind him, and nor, as far as we can judge, did his disciples. His active ministry was short. he was, indeed, unjustly executed – the consequence of an ill-considered promise to an underdressed floozy, but his death is not associated with any particularly heroic sufferings.

John was certainly a good man, a brave man, a great man, but it is easy to imagine that it would be exceedingly difficult to assess the importance of somebody so utterly overshadowed by Jesus Christ. Against God Incarnate, even the greatest human being palls into complete insignificance.

God is the central character of the Bible – the hero, so to speak. The Bible is the account of God's relationship with the human race and of his intervention in our history. Towering figures in the Bible – men such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, mighty King David, the prophet Elijah – are not central characters. They are simply God's human servants; his agents, his tools, his spokesmen. They appear as giants simply because they did not physically share the stage with God.

But John is greater than all of them. He is the last and the greatest of all of the prophets of the Old Testament tradition. He is greater even than Elijah,

a prophet of such sanctity that, instead of letting him die an earthly death, God swept him up to heaven in a chariot of fire. John was the second Elijah, whose coming, foretold by the Prophet Malachi four centuries earlier, heralded the coming of the Messiah.

In today's Gospel Jesus cites Malachi (whose name means “angel” or “messenger” (*Malachi 3:1*): "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold he shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts."

Actually, Jesus could just as well have quoted the Prophet Isaiah who, 300 years before Malachi, had predicted the coming of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ

(*Isaiah 40:3*): "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

The Baptist is the last and greatest of the prophets of the Old Testament, because he is the prophet chosen to "prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway for our God." John didn't fly to heaven in a chariot of fire like Elijah. But he had the privilege of greeting God Incarnate face-to-face. No other Old Testament prophet was granted such an honor. They prophesied great events that demonstrated God's intervention in our history, including the coming of the Messiah. But John, alone, witnessed the completion and fruition of his ministry. And he received the assurance of this from the lips of Jesus Christ, himself.

Nevertheless, John, for all his greatness, remains an entirely human figure. He was afflicted by the very same doubts and uncertainties that afflict us all. He was about five or six months older than Jesus and St. Luke relates that while he still a babe in his mother's womb, he recognized Jesus as the long-awaited messiah.

Shortly after the annunciation, the Blessed Virgin Mary went to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who was six months pregnant with John the Baptist. St. Luke records that as soon as she heard Mary speak, she exclaimed: "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy."

From his birth, John was groomed by his parents to be a great prophet. Even his name has a powerful prophetic ring to it. His name, John, means "Yaweh Has Mercy." He was raised in the austere tradition of the Old Testament prophets, eschewing wine and most meat, devoting most of his waking hours to prayer, scriptural study and physical exercise.

When he began final preparations for his mission, he was probably in his early 30s. In accordance with the ancient custom of holy men, he withdrew to the harsh and rocky desert beyond the River Jordan to prepare for a role he imagined to be the Chairman of the Messiah's Joint Chiefs of Staff. In readiness for the Messiah's campaign of conquest, he dressed in a heavy, camel-hair jerkin, the First century AD equivalent of a flak jacket, and subsisted on a frugal diet of carob and wild honey, a First Century equivalent of MREs ("Meals, Ready to Eat) or C-Rations.

But despite his long prophetic education, John, in his maturity, was unable to do what, as an unborn baby, he had done so easily. He failed to recognize his younger second cousin as the messiah until God revealed it to him on the banks of the River Jordan as Jesus presented himself for baptism. John was stunned by the revelation. He held Jesus back, protesting: "I ought to be baptized by thee, and comest thou to me?" Jesus replied: "Let it now be so; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. Then, as Jesus arose from the Jordan, John heard God's voice from heaven say: "Thou art my beloved Son. In thee I am well pleased."

John's amazement shows that for all his great holiness and piety, he was just as human as any of us. Like his contemporaries, John imagined the messiah would be a military figure like the great soldier-king David, whose role would be to liberate the Holy Land from foreign rule. Even so, once John had recognized Jesus as Messiah, his greatness is evidenced in the fact that he hastened to proclaim him.

"I am not the Christ, but I was sent ahead of him," he told his followers, explaining this ministry was nearing its end and that they should become Jesus' disciples: "He must become greater," he said, "I must become less."

Jesus first disciples were followers of John. Andrew of Bethsaida is known as Andrew the First Called. As the Baptist was talking to Andrew, Jesus passed by. "Behold that Lamb of God," said John. Andrew and John the son of Zebedee, another of the Baptist's disciples, immediately followed him.

This, then, is the context of today's Gospel: Reports came to John – chained in Herod's dungeons – that Jesus was not recruiting an army or planning a guerrilla campaign against the Romans. But instead of counseling his followers to back off or watch their step, he sent them to ask Jesus the \$64,000 question: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" In reply, Jesus pointed to all signs the prophets had foretold Messiah would perform – his miraculous acts of healing, the people he had raised from the dead, and the gospel he was preaching to the people.

By-standers scorned John for his lack of faith. But Jesus set them straight. "What went ye out in the wilderness for to see?" he asked rhetorically, "A reed shaken in the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings houses." [John was, indeed, living in a king's house, but neither gorgeously appareled, nor living delicately.]

"But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.' For I say unto you, among those born of women, there is not a great prophet than John the Baptist." *AMEN.*