



First Lutheran Church

Gospel of Matthew

Summer 2026 Reading Challenge



Deep Dive: John the Baptist

Talking to the Kids
John the Baptist is a key figure in the Jesus story. And depending on the Gospel you read, he gets more or less attention.

In Luke's Gospel, John is connected to Jesus as he is the son of Mary's relative. And while Elizabeth and Mary's relationship isn't more fully defined, some take this to mean John and Jesus are cousins.

Neither Mark nor Matthew have any relationship description between John and Jesus. All four Gospels do identify John as a prophet, as someone with disciples, as someone who baptizes Jesus, as someone who dies at the hand of Herod sometime before Jesus dies at the hand of Pilate.

John is a precursor, a forerunner, to Jesus. The only parallel John doesn't share with Jesus is resurrection.

But we read John's story because he helps us to understand what it means to call out injustice, to die for calling out injustice, and to live our whole life for God's Kingdom.

Week 6: Matthew chapters 11 and 12

- John the Baptist has three passages devoted to him in Matthew's Gospel. John's Ministry is discussed in 3:1-17 (the whole of chapter 3); John is in Jail for this stretch in chapter 11:2-10; and John is killed by Herod in chapter 14:1-12.
- Matthew does not identify John as Jesus' relative. Matthew does, through Jesus' words, identify John as a prophet. In his ministry days, John is in the wilderness, he is not in the center of town, he is on the outskirts. He is not dressed like the those in palaces. And it is important to understand, this wilderness was not entirely empty. Herod and the Romans had palaces and outposts along the Jordan. But John was not like those in fancy clothes or eating sumptuous feasts like those in the palaces. He is wearing clothes that harken back to the old days of prophets, like Elijah. In fact, Jesus will compare John to Elijah. Jewish tradition held that Elijah would return to mark the coming of God's anointed one. And Matthew, as well as the other Gospels, lean into this identity marker for John.
- As John is baptizing, he recognizes Jesus. He is instinctively aware of who Jesus is, the coming one from God, and he does not want to baptize him, but Jesus insists. Even the Anointed One must ritually bathe to cleanse himself from the world and to turn toward God's Kingdom.
- Here now, Jesus hears from John's messengers. John has been imprisoned, though we won't learn until chapter 14 why. Matthew assumes here in chapter 11 that the reader already knows that information, and glosses over it, to get Jesus to align his ministry again with John's. Now one may wonder why John still has disciples, or why he may be questioning if Jesus is really the one to come. And Matthew doesn't give us clear answers. Matthew may be using this narrative to help diverging communities of disciples unite, to hear Jesus affirm John, and to name why he is the prophet who ends one era and prepares Israel for the next era.
- John's death is presented in chapter 14 as a flashback, as if the events didn't actually occur chronologically in that moment, but was something being recalled as events unfolded. Herod thinks Jesus may be John brought back from the dead, but that cannot be, after all, the narrator tells us John was beheaded, and his body buried by his disciples.
- Again, Matthew is saying to those who still hold to John's teachings, come over here to Jesus, now. John was the precursor, Jesus is the real messiah. John is still dead, Jesus is alive. After chapter 14, Matthew does not refer to John again. Everything from here forward points to Jesus' death and resurrection and the full Kingdom of God being revealed only in Jesus.

Gathered by God, we live our faith with: Compassion, Grace, Gratitude, and Joy

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