

The Main Event

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today is the third Sunday of Advent and the observant among you may have noticed that we're taking a second look at John the Baptist. Russ spoke to us about him last week from Mark's Gospel and today we're in the Gospel according to John.

Now, when Mark is all fast-paced and action-packed, John is more of a philosopher. He sits back and he wonders what this all means. He starts his Gospel account with a reflection on who Jesus is, the Word of God made flesh.

This sets the tone. Everything here is about what it means that God himself became one of us. And into that walks John the Baptist.

John is quite an interesting character. We know from Luke's Gospel that he's a relative of Jesus. Their mums were cousins. We also know that John started proclaiming the coming of Jesus before either of them were even born.

He leapt for joy in his mother's womb when Mary, the mother of Jesus, came to visit. And I'm so sure John's parents were very proud and noted down the date and time of baby's first prophecy.

[1 : 1 2] While that first prophecy certainly wasn't his last, John very much lived the life of the classic Old Testament prophet out there in the wilderness calling on his people to repent of sin, to turn back to God.

And he baptized people to represent that. Now, this must have caused quite a stir because in verse 19 we see the leaders in Jerusalem send priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

And he did not fail to confess, but confessed freely. I am not the Messiah. Now, pay attention to that. They ask him who he is and he tells them who he is not.

This tells us everything we need to know about John and what he came to do. It's like verses 6 to 8 say John came as a witness to the light. He's a witness to Jesus.

That is his purpose. He points away from himself and towards the one who is greater than him, who is coming afterwards. And that's what he continues to do as the priests question him further.

[2 : 1 1] They ask him, are you Elijah? I'm not. Are you the prophet? No. Now, these questions tell us what the people were expecting from John.

These names, Elijah, the prophet, they refer to promises in the Old Testament about the coming day of the Lord. That is the day that Israel were waiting for when God would come to rescue his people and to destroy his enemies once and for all.

And on that day, it was expected Elijah, their greatest prophet Israel had, would return to them and get them ready for God to come. And so when John comes making a big scene baptizing people, they assume he's getting the people ready for something big.

But John says, no, I'm not Elijah. No, I'm not the prophet, which is odd for two reasons. Firstly, because he's making a big scene and baptizing people.

But secondly, because elsewhere in the Bible, both an angel from God and Jesus himself say that John is the promised Elijah, that he has come in the spirit and power of Elijah.

[3 : 2 6] So why does John deny it? Again, I think the answer is that he is pointing away from himself so that when he finally does give an answer, people aren't going to get hung up on John.

He's saying, I'm not the main event. I'm not the one you should be getting excited about. I am, verse 23, the voice of one calling in the wilderness, makes straight the way of the Lord.

John, the prophet, quotes another prophet, Isaiah from the Old Testament. Now, the Old Testament prophets pulled sort of a double shift when they prophesied. Yes, they spoke God's words into their own time, to their own people.

But at the same time, those words from God spoke to people down through history. That's why we still read them today. And Isaiah in particular is full of prophecy that points to Jesus, including one

part that is so uncannily similar that for a while people even suspected it might have been fake. It wasn't, by the way. So what John does when he quotes from this prophet is, yes, he's telling people, don't look at me.

[4 : 47] I'm just preparing the way. But more than that, he is joining up Israel's history with what God is doing right then in that moment. He is speaking into centuries of waiting.

He's saying, I'm not the main event, but it's almost time. The one you have been longing for is here among you. Are you ready? Now, Advent is a time of getting ready.

It's a time of waiting and longing. We cast our minds back to wait with Mary and all of Israel for the Son of God to come. We wait for the celebrations to start, the time spent with loved ones.

And of course, this year, we are waiting in the midst of fear and despair in the COVID-19 pandemic. Longing and hoping for a time when its weight will be lifted off our world.

Vital and huge in our minds. But it's not the main event. No, this waiting, this longing, it points us towards something greater that is coming next.

[6 : 01] Waiting for Jesus at Advent teaches us to carry on waiting for him to come again in glory. And our longing for the pandemic to be over reminds us that when he does come, our world will be healed and death and sickness will be no more.

If you have lost someone, if you are mourning, then please be comforted by God's promise that when Jesus comes, the dead will be raised to eternal life with him.

And finally, if, like me, you are tired of these restrictions on our worship, if you are desperate to all come together again, to raise our voices as one in praise to God.

Well, what else can that tell us but that God intends for us to be a family united in praising him? And one day, when Jesus returns, all of God's people will come together around the throne of God to worship him.

And so, as a church, we wait and we hope and we pray. Let us remember what it's all for. So that in our lives together, we may be built up in the power of the Holy Spirit to point the world towards Jesus.

[7 : 25] Amen.