

December 9, 2018 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Baptism of Abbas Zamyad  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 3:1-6

### **Who is this John?**

In the Bible, there are a lot of people named John. One of the twelve disciples was named John, he and his brother James are often spoke of as a pair, the sons of Zebedee. There's also a gospel named John, which might have written by the disciple of that name—or it may have another, later author, whom tradition names John. In addition to the gospel, in the New Testament there are also three epistles, letters, with the name of John. They may have been written by the same person who wrote the gospel of John, there are stylistic similarities, or maybe they were penned by another person, or persons. Then there's the last book in the New Testament, Revelation, which also identifies its author as someone named John—but it's doubtful that's the same person as any of the others already mentioned, Revelation is a very different book. And then there's yet another person named John, a John whose name is usually accompanied with an article and descriptor of what he did with H<sub>2</sub>O: John the Baptist. We especially hear about this John in this church season of Advent, this John who preaches in the wilderness, who plunges people into water, who prepares the way of the Lord.

The name John must have been a popular, back in the first century. Still is. I myself have a particular fondness for it: it is my son's name, and my father's name. This can make it confusing when the two of them are in the same room, especially when I yell at my son, "John!" When I do my dad always flinches at first, and then looks relieved, "Oh, not me."

It can be confusing biblically, as well. Who is this John? This was one of the questions posed to me by the person about to be baptized today, a person whose name is Abbas, Abbas Zamyad. Abbas and his wife Maryam have been coming to our church now and then for the past two years. They're originally from Iran, but they now live in Schaumburg. They got to know our church through their daughters, two of whom initially lived in Chicago but who are now are in other parts of the country, a third is a student at Northwestern. Abbas became interested in Christianity because of the welcome this church showed to their daughters, and to them, how friendly people were, and also the respect shown for all different kinds of people, and backgrounds, and belief systems. Because of this Abbas wanted to know more about Christianity. Abbas told me how much he appreciated how our church was open to people of other faiths, how, growing up where he did, religion was something that came with force: you must be this. He didn't like that. I told him that sometimes Christianity has tried to operate by force, that's a sad part of its history, but it isn't true to its essence. Jesus never forced, Jesus always invited. Abbas liked that, he said he felt that, that feeling of invitation. He told me how some friends had given them books about Christianity, including a Bible, written in Farsi, which is their first language, and how they had been attending Bible studies and worship at a church out in Schaumburg, and also while visiting one of their daughters in California. Abbas even gave a testimony at one of the churches. And he had this feeling, he wanted to be baptized—and he wanted it to happen, here. He told me so earlier this fall, one Sunday after church, as I was greeting him and others after worship, he told me that he wanted to be baptized here. "That's great!" I said, "I would love that to happen."

With our language differences, though, there was a little bit of confusion about what was being communicated in that interaction. Abbas thought I meant, "Great! We'll do it next

Sunday!” And I meant, “Great! Let’s talk more about it.” But we sorted it out, and we did talk more about it, and when we did Abbas had some questions, like, “Who is this John?” He was referring to John the Baptist—how fitting that the Sunday Abbas is being baptized features John the Baptist, surely the Holy Spirit is enjoying this. When Abbas asked me the question about John I thought, Oh, I can clear up that confusion, and I said some of the things I said in today’s sermon introduction, how in the Bible there are a lot of people named John, and John the Baptist is the one that helps people get ready for Jesus, tells people to prepare their hearts—like this time of year, when we prepare for Christmas.

Abbas nodded, and then asked, “And what about the Holy Trinity?” Answering that question felt a lot harder. The Holy Trinity is hard to talk about even when you speak the same language! What is this Triune God, worshipped by Christians, this Triune God into which Abbas is about to be baptized? I took a breath (the Holy Spirit has been known to work through breath) and said, “Well, we call it the Trinity, but it’s not three gods, it’s one God, God is one.” I said, “Christianity says there is only one God, and God is revealed in Jesus—who is also God. Christianity says Jesus is more than a teacher, or an example—although Jesus is that too, but much more than that, too: the Savior. God comes to us in Jesus. And God continues to come to us, be with us, in the Holy Spirit, who is also God.” I said, “The Holy Spirit is like God’s energy, moving through Jesus, and moving through the world, even now, moving through us.”

And then Abbas asked, “And what about the resurrection?” And, once again, I felt the limitations of language, the limitations of my ability to convey something that confounds human comprehension. I started speaking, hoping the Holy Spirit would show up. I said, “The resurrection is another one of the great mysteries of Christian faith. We can’t explain it scientifically, we believe its promise: that death is not the end, that God’s love is even more powerful, that there is something more, something beyond our understanding, a life for which we don’t even have words...” And Abbas said, and it was so clear that the Holy Spirit had shown up: in him. Abbas said, “I don’t understand it here, but I understand it here.”

That’s how God speaks, through the Holy Spirit, God speaks to our hearts. Through the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us, inviting, urging, enlightening, refining, warning, warming. That’s how God spoke through John the Baptist. John spoke to people’s hearts, and it drew them. It drew them out into the wilderness, to hear fiery words, words bright with truth and hope. It drew them to be washed with cleansing water, to make their hearts ready, to prepare for the coming of God, the one God, whose salvation is for all. That’s how God speaks, through the Holy Spirit, through you, through this church, when we are a place where people feel that, experience that, are drawn to that. That’s what we are to do: to prepare the way for Christ. For clarity’s sake, we have different names, but we are all that John.