

At the Jordan River with John the Baptist

Our pilgrimage now takes us from Bethlehem to the Jordan River, a trip of approximately an hour and a half for us, and thirty years for Jesus. The Bible tells us very little about Jesus between the story of His birth and His baptism by John in the Jordan River. We have discussed a couple of incidents in previous photo-journal entries including the Flight to Egypt and the youthful Jesus being “lost” in the Temple, and in a future entry we will discuss the Holy Family’s encounter with Simeon and the prophetess Anna in the Temple, but beyond these events the Scriptures are silent. So we must allow Jesus’ pre-public ministry to remain a Mystery, and now turn our attention to Saint John the Forerunner, John the Baptist, John the Baptizer of Jesus, John the Best-Man, John aka Elijah, and John the Uncertain.



Byzantine icon of the Visitation

Jesus, in the womb of Mary, is blessing His cousin John, while John, filled with the Holy Spirit while in the womb of Elizabeth, humbles himself before the Son of God.

We first met John the Baptist at the Church of the Visitation in *Ein Kerem* when Mary visited Elizabeth pregnant with John in her womb:

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”⁴³ And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. (Luke 1:41-44)

Some Catholic traditions hold that at the moment John came into the presence of Jesus (in Mary’s womb) he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and as a result lived a sinless life, this however is not official Catholic doctrine. The Eastern Orthodox hold to a different view, that is, John was the last and the

greatest of the Old Covenant prophets, and served as a bridge between the Old and the New Covenants. He is held in high honor in the both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches because of the words that Jesus spoke regarding John, “Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist....” His greatness comes from his relationship with our Lord which as we saw earlier began even before either one of them was born. John’s relationship with Jesus is multifaceted in that he is the forerunner, baptizer, and “best man” to Jesus.

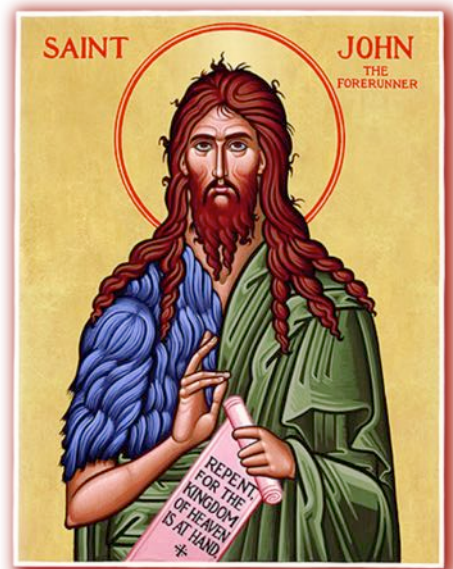
John the Forerunner

All of the Gospels make it clear that the ministry of John as Forerunner is to prepare the way for Jesus:

In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea [and] saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: “A voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’” (Matt 3:1-3)

John, wearing clothing made with camel hair and a leather belt around his waist, was that “voice crying in the wilderness.” He called all of Israel to repentance, gently encouraging charity to some, while excoriating the religious hypocrites.

He said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from



these stones.... And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." (Luke 3:7-8; 10-14)

Central to the teaching of John the Forerunner was that the "Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Such a phrase would have struck a cord with John's audience for they all knew that their prophets had foretold that someday a Messiah would come and establish his kingdom in Israel. The Jews had suffered under the rule of the Roman Empire and they were eagerly waiting for the day when the Messiah would come and deliver them from their oppressors like Moses had done for their forefathers in Egypt. They too wanted to enter the Promised Land of the Messianic Kingdom where the descendant of King David would rule from Jerusalem and his reign would be everlasting. John taught that this day was "at hand" and that people needed to prepare, a preparation of inner transformation through repentance and baptism.

John the Baptist

⁵ At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him ⁶ and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. (Matt 3:5-6)

Why baptism?

The word baptism comes from the Greek word *baptismos*, a term that was used in the Septuagint to refer to the ritual washing (*tivlah* or *mikvah* in Hebrew) performed during certain Jewish religious practices. The ritual washing represented not only an external cleansing, but also a purification of the inner man. Baptism was the central sacrament of John's ministry and of his disciples. The repentance and purification of Israel would be the means by which John would "prepare the way of the Lord," and to "make straight his paths."

We all know, however, that the path that Jesus walked was filled with challenges, conflicts and disappointments. How many times did He have to deal with the Pharisees and Scribes who rejected Him, laying traps for Jesus so that they might bring charges against Him? How many times was He unable to perform any mighty works because of their unbelief? How many times would the people not hear Jesus because of the hardness of their hearts? Many to be sure, yet many did believe including some of John's disciples who followed Jesus. We can only speculate how many might not have followed Jesus had it not been for John's ministry as the forerunner of Jesus, but it is unlikely that he would have earned the title as "the greatest man born of woman" had his ministry repentance and baptism not been effective.

Why the River Jordan?

Ritual washing in the Jordan River may have its roots in the fact that the Children of Israel had to pass through the Jordan River before they entered the Promised Land. It is possible that John the Baptist saw a parallel between crossing through the Jordan in order to enter the Promised Land and the ritual immersion of baptism in the Jordan in order to prepare the people for the coming Kingdom of Heaven and the Messiah. The cleansing power of the Jordan River would have also been well known to John as he would have been well aware of the story of Naaman the Leper, commander of the armies of the King of Aram, who was instructed by Elisha, the prophet, to wash in the Jordan River.



¹Naaman, the army commander of the king of Aram, was highly esteemed and respected by his master, for through him the LORD had brought victory to Aram. But valiant as he was, the man was a leper..... ⁹Naaman came with his horses and chariot and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent him the message: "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean." ¹¹But Naaman went away angry, saying, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand there to call on the name of the LORD his God, and would move his hand over the place, and thus cure the leprous spot. ¹²Are not the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the

Pharpar, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed?" With this, he turned about in anger and left.

¹³ *But his servants came up and reasoned with him: "My father, if the prophet told you to do something extraordinary, would you not do it? All the more since he told you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"* ¹⁴ *So Naaman went down and plunged into the Jordan seven times, according to the word of the man of God. His flesh became again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2Kings 5:1,9-14)*



There were those who thought that John might be the Messiah. Priest and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to ask John whether he was the Messiah. He said he was not. They asked if he was Elijah, the prophet, as many of the Jews believed that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah, but again John said he was not. Instead, John said that He was simply "a voice crying out in the wilderness."

But in regard to the Messiah, John told them that another would come after him. "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire."

John the Baptizer of Jesus

¹³ *Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.* ¹⁴ *John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?"* (Matt 3:13-14)

When John recognizes that Jesus desired to be baptized he tries to stop him. Why?—because John recognizes Jesus has no need of repentance or of ritual cleansing because He is the spotless Lamb of God.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

¹⁵ *Jesus said to him in reply, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* (Matt 3:15)

We do not know the extent to which John the Baptist understood the mystery of the Son of God's incarnation and *kenosis*. Did John know that Jesus was both fully God and fully man with both a divine and human will? Did He understand that Jesus had taken our human nature into His one personhood; that in His divine humility that He had taken into Himself not only the sins of humanity, but also our sinfulness so as to heal our human nature? This is what Jesus brought with Him into the River Jordan to be baptized by John, and in so doing He fulfilled *all righteousness*, for *all humanity*, for all times for all who participate with Him in baptism.

Baptism is intimately linked with the Pascal Mystery for as Saint Paul said,

³ *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* ⁴ *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)*

Then he allowed him. (Matt 3:15)



The Baptism of Jesus
Church of Saint John the Baptist, Ein Kerem

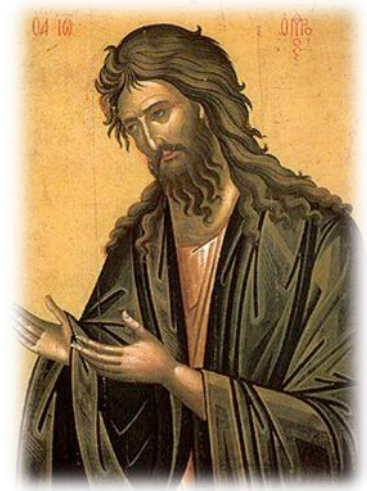
In allowing Jesus to be baptized John, the last and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, initiated the New Covenant. For the Old Covenant had been sealed by the blood of bulls and goats (Exo 24:3-8), but the New with the Blood of the Lamb:

⁴ *For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.... He [Jesus] abolishes the first in order to establish the second.* ¹⁰ *And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* (Heb 10:4,10)

²⁷ *And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* (Matt 26:27-28)

John's ministry would change after he baptized Jesus; recognizing this he began to direct his disciples towards Jesus:

²⁹ *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete.* ³⁰ *He must increase; I must decrease."* (John 3:30)



He must increase; I must decrease.

Was it a challenge for John to acknowledge that His ministry was coming to an end, and that he would fade away while Jesus' ministry would surpass his own? I can imagine it would be for many of us, but apparently not for John as he proclaimed, "So this joy of mine has been made complete." This joy is echoed by Saint Paul in his Epistles:

"...yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me...." (Gal 2:20)

¹³ *I can do all things in him who strengthens me.* (Phil 4:13)

It is the joy having that same mind which is in Christ Jesus, and of participating in Christ's *kenosis*, His self-emptying. (Phil 2) It is the joy of selling all that one has in order to purchase the field in which is hidden a treasure of immeasurable value (Matt 13:44). It is in this that we *know* the Lord:

⁸ *Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* (Phil 3:8)

But we haven't finished with John the Baptist farewell address. Let us look at this again:

²⁹ *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete.* ³⁰ *He must increase; I must decrease."*

John the Best Man

John identifies himself as the "best man," so now we have three names for the cousin of Jesus: John the Forerunner, John the Baptist, and now John the Best Man, or in Hebrew it would be John the *Shōshbēn*. In the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony in Jesus' time the *shōshbēn* would have been the best friend of the Bridegroom. So wait a minute, if John is the best man of Jesus, which means that Jesus is the Bridegroom, but then who is the Bride? The Church is the Bride of Christ:

²⁸ *So [also] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* ²⁹ *For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church,* ³⁰ *because we are members of his body.* ³¹ *"For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* ³² *This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.* ³³ *In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.* (Eph 5:28-33)

The traditional Jewish wedding consisted of three elements, the Arrangement (*Shiddukhin*), the Betrothal (*Eyrusin*), and the Marriage ceremony (*Nissuin*). It is possible to view the entirety of the Holy Scripture in the context of these three elements. The Old Testament is *Shiddukhin*, as the Father seeks to work out the marriage arrangement between His Son and the Chosen People of Israel. John the Best Man bridges the arrangement of the Old Covenant

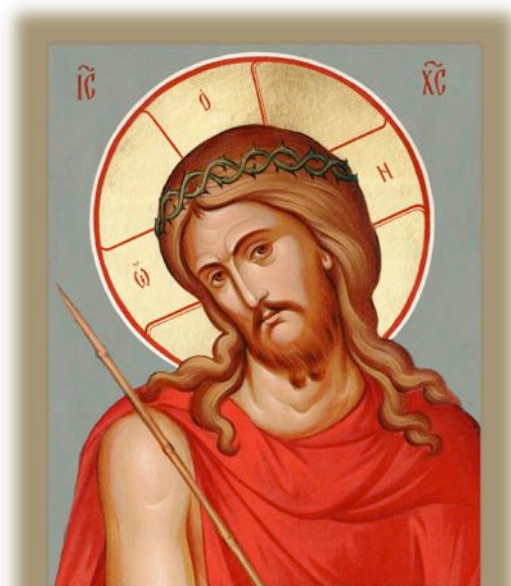
with the New as he puts the final touches on the contract, the *ketubah*, between the Bridegroom and the Bride. John lays out the details of the *ketubah*, the bride price, which the Bridegroom will pay:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

The price that Jesus would pay for His bride is His own Body and Blood for her redemption. What was the bride’s responsibility? She was to repent, acknowledge her sins, and wash her robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14).

Once this contract was agreed upon, the final step of the *Shiddukhin* would be the *mikvah*, the ritual immersion of the Bridegroom and the Bride; this was the sealing of the arrangement, after this the period of time, known as the *Eyrusin*, or Betrothal, would begin.

The baptism by John, both of Jesus and all of us who have been baptized in the name of the Trinity, was and is the *mikvah* of the *Shiddukhin*. John sealed the agreement between the Bridegroom, Jesus, and the Bride, the Church. John bridged the Arrangement of the Old Testament and the Betrothal of the New Testament. The Father witnessed and approved the arrangement for both His children, the Bridegroom and the Bride:



Behold, The Bridegroom

²¹ *After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened* ²² *and the holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* (Luke 3:21-22)

In the Orthodox Church this event, the Baptism of Jesus and of “all the people,” is celebrated as the Theophany, meaning the “Revelation of God.” How so? It is a revelation of the Triune God as all the Persons of the Trinity are present at the baptism/*mikvah* of Jesus, the Father (the voice from heaven), the Holy Spirit (in bodily form like a dove), and the Son, Jesus. The next phase of the marriage tradition, the betrothal of the Bridegroom and the bride would follow. But would John be present to assist Jesus as His *Shōshbēn*?

It was not long after John baptized Jesus that he was arrested, imprisoned, and then executed by Herod, so it appears that John’s ministry to Jesus as His best man was over. Appears...except for the curious thing that Jesus said about John. While John was in prison he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the one, the Messiah of God.

⁴ *Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”*(Matt 11:4-6)

After John’s disciples left, Jesus turned to the crowd who had witnessed the interaction between Jesus and the disciples of John. Jesus addresses the crowd:

“What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. ⁹Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written:

*‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way before you.’*

¹¹ *Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force. ¹³All the prophets and the law prophesied up to the time of John. ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come. ¹⁵Whoever has ears ought to hear.* (Matt 11:7-15)

John aka Elijah the Prophet

What? Has Jesus added another title to His cousin—“John aka Elijah the Prophet?” John was specifically asked this earlier when he was preaching and baptizing:



“He is Elijah, the one who is to come.”

¹⁹When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites [to him] to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Messiah.” ²¹So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” (John 1:19-21)

So whom should we believe—Jesus or John? That’s easy, Jesus. But if you remember from the Photo-Journal entry on the Church of Saint John the Baptist we read the scripture that discussed the angel’s proclamation to John’s father, Zechariah, announcing that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son who was to be called John:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of [the] Lord. He will drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb, ¹⁶and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷He will go before him in **the spirit and power of Elijah** to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.” (Luke 1:13-17, emphasis added)

Jesus was confirming what the angel had said about John before he had even been born. John’s ministry as the Forerunner and Baptizer was, as the angel had proclaimed to Zechariah, “to prepare a people fit for the Lord;” a people worthy to become the Bride of the Bridegroom.

But let us return for a moment to the question that the “Jews from Jerusalem” asked of John. Once John answered that he was not the Messiah, they immediately asked him if he was Elijah. Of all of the prophets, why would they ask John if he were Elijah? To answer that question we have to turn to the Old Testament prophet, Malachi:

²²Remember the law of Moses my servant, whom I charged at Horeb with statutes and ordinances for all Israel. ²³Now I am sending to you Elijah the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day; ²⁴He will turn the heart of fathers to their sons, and the heart of sons to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction. (Malachi 4:4-5)

The Jews believed that before the Messiah would come Elijah would return. This is the same passage of scripture that the angel had quoted to Zechariah. This is why the Jews asked John if he were Elijah because if he had answered “yes,” then they would have been anticipated that the Messiah would be coming soon.

What does this have to do with the issue as to whether or not John could complete his ministry as Jesus’ *shōshbēn*? Remember, that the *shōshbēn* would be present for wedding ceremony, and since John was in prison and soon would be dead, it is difficult to see how he could fulfill his best man responsibilities. Or could he? Is there any evidence from the scripture that John was present for the betrothal ceremony? Yes. What about evidence that John will be present at the wedding? Yes again, but we will save these discussions for later, as there is one more aspect of John’s life that we need to discuss.

John the Uncertain

One of the things that I find remarkable is how the Holy Scripture presents people, even the heroes of the scriptures, with all their foibles, i.e., “warts and all.” One just has to read about the life of King David and you recognize that the Holy Spirit is determined to make sure that we understand that the human condition is *fallen*. This is also true of John.

Consider that John was filled with the Holy Spirit while in Elizabeth's womb and how he leapt with joy when he heard Mary's voice, yet he did not recognize that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God until he baptized Him in the Jordan (John 1:29-34). Consider how John heard the Father's voice and saw the Holy Spirit descend as a dove upon Jesus, and even testified that Jesus was the Son of God. Nevertheless, he still sent his disciples to ask of Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

What are we to make of John's uncertainty?

The Scripture makes it clear that those who are committed to serve God will experience spiritual warfare that challenges their confidence in their call, but even in their faith in God.

⁸ *Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, steadfast in faith, knowing that your fellow believers throughout the world undergo the same sufferings.* (1Peter 5:8-9)

However we are to understand the mystery of John and Elijah, one thing we know for certain and that is they both shared this same uncertainty. It was shortly after Elijah's miraculously defeat the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1Kings 18:16-40) that a simple message from Jezebel put the prophet into a tail spin:

¹ *Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done—that he had murdered all the prophets by the sword.* ² *Jezebel then sent a messenger to Elijah and said, "May the gods do thus to me and more, if by this time tomorrow I have not done with your life what was done to each of them."* ³ *Elijah was afraid and fled for his life, going to Beer-sheba of Judah. He left his servant there* ⁴ *and went a day's journey into the wilderness, until he came to a solitary broom tree and sat beneath it. He prayed for death: "Enough, LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."* (1Kings 19:1-4)

I believe that we can all relate to John the Uncertain. Jesus responded to the messengers to ask Him if He was the "one," by quoting the Scripture:

⁴ *Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.* (Matt 11:4-5)

John would recognize these prophecies of the Messiah from the Book of Isaiah; so Jesus indirectly answered John's question in the affirmative. But then Jesus adds,

⁶ *And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."* (Matt 11:6)

The commentary on this verse in the New American Bible (revised edition) provides insight into what Jesus was telling John: "The beatitude is a warning to the Baptist not to disbelieve because his expectations have not been met." How true that is.

Is it possible that while sitting in prison, John's expectations of what it meant to be Jesus' *shōshbēn* were likely not going to be fulfilled, or at least not in the way he was anticipating? And if that were true, was Jesus even the Bridegroom?

When God does not fulfill *our* expectations it causes us to question God's plan for us or, or perhaps His plan for those we love. Perhaps we question if He really will fulfill the promises spoken by Him in the Holy Scripture. Maybe we even question if He is Who He says He is, or even if He really is at all? I don't know if there is a single Christian who hasn't experienced sitting in a "prison cell" of our own expectations, and asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"



Saint John The Baptist In Prison Visited By Salome
Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (Guercino)

Baptism in the Church

Baptism in the Church functions much like the baptism of John. First, when the Jews crossed the Jordan River they were leaving the bondage of slavery and death in Egypt for the freedom of the Promised Land. So too, in our baptism in the Church, we crossover from the slavery of sin and death of our *fallenness* into a life of freedom in the Kingdom of God.

³ *Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.* (Rom 6:3-4)

Second, the baptism of John was a cleansing such as experienced by Naaman who was cured of his leprosy. Baptism in the Church cleanses us from all sin, and we emerge a new creation, “in the newness of life.” This does not mean, as any Christian will admit, that the baptized do not continue to struggle with sin, but we are initiated into the Body of Christ, the Church, with all her gifts, sacraments and graces so that we might grow into “the full stature of Christ:

¹¹ *And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love.* (Eph 4:11-15)

We also learned that the ritual cleansing of baptism is a *mikvah* as performed at the end of the Arrangement of the traditional Jewish wedding. Our baptism is more than a reminder that we are betrothed to Christ, it is a contractual agreement between two parties, Christ and the baptized, to spend the betrothal period preparing ourselves for the wedding ceremony at the “end of the age.”

Kevin’s Reflection: On “John the Uncertain”

I asked earlier, “What are we to make of John’s uncertainty?” In my response to this question I discussed the doubt that can arise as a result of being under spiritual warfare, and when our expectations of God, the Faith, the Church, of our clergy, and even ourselves are not met. In this reflection I would like to take a different approach to the issue of doubt; that of it being an essential part of our spiritual, and intellectual development.

It is common to our human nature that we seek the truth; it is part of that which has been built into us. The desire for truth is one of those homing beacons that are supposed to lead us to the One Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Obviously, it doesn’t always work the way it was originally designed and there are a lot of reasons for this, but that’s another topic. The point is, once we believe we have found the truth, we gain a sense of security having at least one thing certain in our lives to cling to in this ever changing, and often chaotic world. This “certainty” becomes our Touchstone, our North Star that we can always return to in times of confusion when we have need of re-orientation.

Truth and certainty can also be a point of contention, as obviously people will have different views on what is true. Some may attempt to abandon the pursuit of truth altogether adopting an epistemological relativism, but I have found there is no one more certain or more contentious as someone who insists that certainty is beyond our grasp. We all love our certainty and uncertainty is very disconcerting so we inevitably build walls around our thoughts, ideas, and paradigms (religious, secular, political, economic, etc.) to secure ourselves from the uncertainty of doubt. We see in the daily political discourse, but it manifest in religious “dialogue” as well. Just ask Saint Stephen:

⁵⁴ *When they heard this, they were infuriated, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together.* (Acts 7:54-57)

They cried out in a loud voice, covering their ears—kind of like kids covering their ears while saying loudly, “la, la, la,” so they can’t hear what they don’t want to know. We don’t like our ideas challenged, some will even kill to protect ourselves from the uncertainty of doubt. But a “journey of faith” (a real one) requires the “renewing of our

minds,” and God is going to be challenging our certainties, making us uncomfortable, and yes, even leading us into doubt. The question is are we going to put our hands over our ears, and shout “la, la, la.” I hope not, because if we do we are going to miss out on opportunities to live in the abundant life that is to be found Christ Jesus.

Some one who had a lot to say about the pedagogy of doubt is Saint Augustine. Before he was a theologian, Saint Augustine was a philosopher. One of the main things that philosophers have thought about (and still do) is how do we know and how can we be certain? A good many philosophers sought for a single, certain principle upon which they could then logically deduce a certain body of knowledge. You may remember Rene Descartes attempted this with his *Cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” Saint Augustine approached this same problem about a thousand years earlier than Descartes, and I think we can learn a few things about the value of uncertainty in our lives from him.

Saint Augustine, like many of the philosophers before him, questioned whether or not one could know any “thing” with certainty when “things” are always changing. Then when he turned his thoughts inward he found that it too is always changing. Everywhere he looked whether it was in the sensible world or the inner world of the mind he was left with the uncertainty of doubt. He then arrived at an epiphany of sorts, not unlike Descartes would do many years later, and that was of his “doubts” he was certain and from this he formulated the certainty of his own existence: *Si fallor, sum*: “I doubt, therefore I am.” But rather than attempting to build a body of certain knowledge from the certainty of his self-existence, Augustine perceives a far greater existential reality beyond his mind, transcending his mind, not necessitated by his mind, and unapproachable by his mind, and it is not his “I am,” but *the I AM WHO AM*.

Here, standing in the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt, the mind with its *reason* trembles before the Ineffable, yet *faith* accepts and receives the illuminating Divine Light:

¹² *But to those who did accept Him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, (John 1:12)*

And as a child of God the mind enters the divine light Who is God Himself, and whose radiance shines on all creation revealing its inner truth:

⁴ *In him was life, and the life was the light of men.* ⁵ *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4-5)*

Doubt becomes an essential element of a divine pedagogy by which our minds are renewed (Rom 12:2), and by which we are save to the uttermost (Heb 7:25), and from glory to glory (2Cor 3:18). How does this work? Often it is God who challenges the “certainty” of our faith, not the devil although He may use the devil in the process. We grow comfortable in *our* understanding of Him and the religious structures that we, or others, have built around Him. We do not grow or feel we have need to grow in our faith and understanding. We have it all figured out, just stay on track and get off on the station that says, “Heaven.” But God has so much more for us and the only way He can get our attention is by shattering our certainty, to bring us to the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt. It is up to us then as to what we will do here. Do we cling to our “teddy-bear-like” faith and run back to the security and comfort of our status quo certainty? Or do we enter deeper into the darkness of doubt, the “dark night of the mind,” as John did while sitting in Herod’s prison. “Are you the One, or do we look for another?” He received his answer, and I have every expectation his faith and understanding ascended to an even greater level of glory. And I believe ours will too if we will trust God and not fear doubt when we encounter it on our journey of faith.

Jan’s Reflection:

John lives as an ascetic in the desert and he had many disciples. I believe he was one of the most important biblical figures to advance the Kingdom of God to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus. We know him as the Forerunner; the Baptizer, but he is more than that to me. He was a radical for Jesus. People kept coming to him to be baptized and to hear his preaching. They wanted to know what they had to do to change. To repent is to change and turn in the other direction. John would tell them how to change and they radically changed as a result of his preaching and teaching.

John called the Pharisees a “brood of vipers.” He also spoke against Herod taking his brother’s wife. And he did not count the cost. He is a great example to us in how we should live.

Jesus said the “Kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force.” I believe John helped to forcefully advance the Kingdom. He knew what he was called to do and he accomplished it. I also believe he demonstrated that passivity has no place in the truly authentic Christian life. Blessed is John the Baptist!

Prayers to Saint John the Baptist

I. O glorious Saint John the Baptist, greatest prophet among those born of woman, although thou wast sanctified in thy mother's womb and didst lead a most innocent life, nevertheless it was thy will to retire into the wilderness, there to devote thyself to the practice of austerity and penance; obtain for us of thy Lord the grace to be wholly detached, at least in our hearts, from earthly goods, and to practice Christian mortification with interior recollection and with the spirit of holy prayer.

∞ Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

II. O most zealous Apostle, who, without working any miracle on others, but solely by the example of thy life of penance and the power of thy word, didst draw after thee the multitudes, in order to dispose them to receive the Messiah worthily and to listen to His heavenly doctrine; grant that it may be given unto us, by means of thy example of a holy life and the exercise of every good work, to bring many souls to God, but above all those souls that are enveloped in the darkness of error and ignorance and are led astray by vice.

∞ Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

III. O Martyr invincible, who, for the honor of God and the salvation of souls didst with firmness and constancy withstand the impiety of Herod even at the cost of thine own life, and didst rebuke him openly for his wicked and dissolute life; by thy prayers obtain for us a heart, brave and generous, in order that we may overcome all human respect and openly profess our faith in loyal obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ, our divine Master.

∞ Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

V. Pray for us, Saint John the Baptist

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray.

O God, who hast made this day to be honorable in our eyes by the commemoration of blessed John the Baptist, grant unto Thy people the grace of spiritual joy, and direct the minds of all Thy faithful into the way of everlasting salvation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.