

Spicy John the Baptist

Leann Williams, January 4, 2026

John 1: 6-18, Luke 3:7-18

We have just celebrated Advent and Christmas, the coming of the baby Jesus who Matthew identifies as the Jewish Messiah and Luke identifies as the Savior for all humankind. This week the traditional church calendar celebrates the visit of the wise men to the holy family. The book of Mark skips the story of Jesus' birth and the wise men's visit and starts with the prophecy from Isaiah, "I will send my messenger ahead of you...a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord!" This passage is identified with John the Baptist. I have been pondering how John the Baptist prepared the way for the ministry and message of Jesus.

The gospel of John starts with a broad understanding of Jesus as the Word become flesh. I appreciate The Voice's poetic version of John Chapter 1 which reads,

1 Before time itself was measured, the Voice was speaking.

The Voice was and is God.

²This *celestial* Word remained ever present with the Creator;

³ His speech shaped the entire cosmos.

Immersed in the practice of creating,
all things that exist were birthed in Him.

⁴His breath filled all things
with a living, breathing light—

⁵A light that thrives in the depths of darkness,
blazes through murky bottoms.

It cannot and will not be quenched.

⁶A man named John, who was sent by God, *was the first to clearly articulate the source of this Light.* ⁷This baptizer put in plain words the *elusive mystery of the Divine Light* so all might believe through him. *Some wondered whether he might be the Light,* ⁸but John was not the Light. He merely pointed to the Light. ⁹The true Light, who shines upon *the heart of everyone*, was coming into the cosmos.

¹⁰ He entered our world, a world He made; yet the world did not recognize Him. ¹¹ Even though He came to His own people, they refused to *listen and* receive Him. ¹² But for all who did receive and trust in Him, He gave them the right to be *reborn as* children of God.

¹⁴ The Voice took on flesh *and became human* and chose to live alongside us. We have seen Him, enveloped in undeniable splendor—the one *true* Son of the Father—*evidenced in* the perfect balance of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John *the Baptist* testified about Him and shouted, “This is the one I’ve been telling you is coming. He is much greater than I am because He existed *long* before me.” ¹⁶ Through this man we all receive *gifts of* grace beyond our imagination. ¹⁷ You see, Moses gave *us* rules to live by, but Jesus the Anointed offered *us* gifts of grace and truth. ¹⁸ God, unseen until now, is revealed in the Voice, God’s only Son, *straight from* the Father’s heart.”

What was the message John the Baptist preached that prepared the way for the Lord? His very lifestyle testified to his message. It is interesting to note that John the Baptist was Zechariah the priest’s first-born son. It would have been expected that he would also be a priest. Yet, John chose to live in the desert, wear camel hair clothes, eat locusts and honey, and was NOT a part of the Jewish sacrificial system as would have been expected. His very lifestyle challenged the norms and assumptions of his people and his times. His life served as a witness to a change that Jesus brought in how we relate to God. His preaching testified to Jesus ushering in a new way to experience the Divine Light apart from the law, arising from truth and grace.

John 1:7 in many English translations reads, John “came as a witness to testify about the Light.” I find it interesting that the two Greek words translated witness and testify both come from the root word *martys* from which we get the English word *martyr*. A martyr gives his or her life for what they believe. Ultimately, John did just that.

We can read about John’s message in Matthew 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The word translated

repentance is the Greek word *metanoia* that Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines as *a change of mind or purpose*. The ancient historian Josephus in his work Antiquities, further defines *metanoia* as *a change of mind of those who abhor their errors and misdeeds or of those who enter upon a better course*. Strong's Concordance defines *metanoia* as to change one's mind, to reconsider, or to think differently. John challenged his listeners to consider an entirely different frame of reference for how they lived.

John baptized people in the Jordan River as a symbol of their repentance. The water symbolized cleansing and the start of a new life. He gained quite a following, and crowds came to see this strange fellow who was obviously bucking the system. His popularity aroused suspicion among the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem. They sent representatives to check him out. His response was somewhat less than hospitable. In fact, it was rather spicy.

The Voice in Luke chapter 3 reports John saying,

“You bunch of venomous snakes! Who told you that you could escape God's coming wrath? ⁸ Don't just talk of turning to God; you'd better bear the authentic fruit of a changed life. Don't take pride in your religious heritage, saying, “We have Abraham for our father!” Listen—God could turn these rocks into children of Abraham!

⁹ *God wants you to bear fruit!* If you don't produce good fruit, then you'll be chopped down like a fruitless tree and made into firewood. God's ax is taking aim and ready to swing!”

Pretty spicy words from John! It's clear that John considered our actions to speak louder than words and he believed God emphasizes actions over words as well.

It is the fruit of our lives that gives evidence of repentance, an inner transformation, or a new paradigm. It wasn't clear to the crowds exactly what John meant so they asked him, “Well, what should we do then?” John answered that anyone who has two coats should share one with someone who has none and anyone who has food should do the same. To tax collectors he said, “Don't collect any more than you are

required to.” To soldiers he said “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay.” In John's statements to the crowds, I find four principles. Evidence of repentance will include generosity, contentment, honesty, and a refusal to use power or privilege to harm others.

This whole scenario with John the Baptist reminds me of the long-held practice among Quakers of articulating core values or what we refer to as our testimonies which include simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality or equity, and stewardship. An acronym for these testimonies or values is SPICES. It is our shared historic perspective that inner transformation by the Spirit should work its way into our daily lives to give evidence of our new paradigm that stands in opposition to the powers of this world and the systems that they have created.

John's principles seem to me to be foundations for our Quaker testimonies. Generosity motivates me to create margins in my life of extra time, energy, and resources to give when a need arises. That process of creating margins is how I understand simplicity. Contentment is required for simplicity. I need to know and live into the idea of enough. When do I have enough so that I can stop consuming unnecessarily? Living within the limits of enough is good stewardship. Honesty is a big part of living with integrity. Not using my power or privilege to harm others supports the values of peace, community, and equity.

The times of John the Baptist and the life of Jesus of Nazareth as he entered his ministry were very similar to our own. The Romans used their power to dominate and subjugate people, often established a reign of terror, and disregarded the value of individual human beings. Greed and violence were part of their culture as it is in ours today. May we take the opportunity of a new year to do some deep reflection on how we wish to live our lives in opposition to the dominant systems around us and to bring light into the darkness in which we live and demonstrate the grace and truth that Jesus brought to us.

In closing, I would like to share from a blog entitled The Beautiful Mess by John Pavlovitz dated Dec 20, 2025.

“We are not who we say we are in this life; we are what we do with it. The values we espouse aren’t actually valuable to us unless we embody those values when it is most difficult, when it confronts our preferences, or when it elevates someone we disagree with. We can make every grand declaration and proffer the most virtuous responses with our lips regarding the traits we treasure, but at the end of the day, our convictions are the sum total of our choices.”

In your bulletin or online, you will find our core values, SPICES, and the following query. How do generosity, contentment, honesty, and refusal to use power or privilege to harm others relate to the Quaker testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality or equity, and stewardship?