

The First Family of Christmas & The Last Man Before Christmas: Cousin John

Pastor Jeff Wood

First Presbyterian, Sebastian

Nov. 27, 2016

Regardless of who we voted for or the outcome of the election, there was going to be this January a new family in the White House. We call them First Families. They're special, I guess because they live, after all, at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, that symbol of power. And they're in the spotlight so much of the time. They can bring a humanness and even warmth into otherwise stark politics. Who can forget pictures of First Families like the one with JFK and his son playing under his desk?

There is a kind of First Family in the New Testament. There was no election and there is no Pennsylvania Avenue. Nonetheless, this a very important family within which is the leader of all humankind. I call them the First Family of Christmas. Before them there wasn't a Christmas and with them Christmas came.

They were a family in many ways like ours. Take away the cultural and time variations and you have uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, and the like. We're going to look and listen today to one who met Jesus in utero and was his cousin. Elizabeth and Mary met while they were pregnant and Elizabeth said to Mary that her child had leapt inside her womb at coming upon Mary's child in her womb.

These two, John and Jesus, as cousins were within months of each other in age. They would have been at the same family reunions getting all sweaty playing games before the potluck. They would have been at the same funerals trying to act religious and probably glad when it was over. They would have been at the same weddings finding something to

snicker at together such that some adults would have turned and hushed them with a glare. They would have come into young manhood together walking the same roads and passing Roman soldiers and talking about Rome, about current events, and how the harvest might turn out this year.

We want to look at and listen to John today for what he can tell us about the Christ who brought us the Christ event and changed history.

Matthew 3:1-12.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea [2] and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." [3] This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' "*

[4] John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. [5] People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. [6] Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

[7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? [8] Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. [9] And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. [10] The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

[11] "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [12] His winnowing

fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Only two of the twenty-four books of the NT have the birth and childhood story of Jesus. But all four of the biographies of Jesus, the Gospels, have in the start of them John the Baptist. Further, all of them link him with the great Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40 in which we are told that Elijah will prep for the Messiah ("valleys raised up and hills brought low, rough places smoothed, in anticipation of the revealing of God's glory").

I remember a President coming to my college campus when I was a student and the Secret Service agents around ahead of time and how many buildings got a fresh coat of paint before his arrival. It was an established expectation in Judaism that just as a Secret Service advance team might prep for the arrival of the President so that would happen for the Messiah, the special agent of God. They thought of him as Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. It is laid out not just in Isaiah 40 but other places. For example, (and don't you think this is a rather strategic place?) in the last verses of the Old Testament. Malachi 4:5-6. "I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers." Now that's no more than a couple pages away from our text. So close and *yet so far*. So far for the voice of God through prophets falls quiet with the close of Malachi for more than four hundred years.

In Matthew 17 we have another illustration of the commonness of the expectation. It's the story of Jesus' transfiguration. He's on a mountain with Peter, James, and John. They are joined by Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the head of the prophets. So

there with Jesus are the *embodiments* of the law and the prophets. Moses and Elijah depart and coming down the mountain the disciples ask, “Why does everyone say that Elijah must come before the Messiah?” Why does *everyone* say.¹

A Jewish family, even today, leaves an empty chair, during the seder (Passover meal), for Elijah should he come. At one point ceremonially a child will leave the table, go to the door, and see if Elijah is there.

Matthew lays out the conviction that the Elijah forerunner is John the Baptist. He does it, for example, in describing John as wearing a garment of camel hair and a leather belt. In II Kings 1 the king, Ahaziah, is injured. He sends some of his men to ask Elijah if he’s going to get better. When they get back they have bad news. “No, you’re not going to make it.” Then Ahaziah, wanting to make sure they got the right word from the right guy and not the wrong word from the wrong guy, asks, “What did the prophet look like?” They replied, vs 8, “He was a man with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist.” What does our text say about John? Vs 4, “Clothes made of camels hair and he had a leather belt around his waist.” Elijah!

The Gospel writers don’t just come up with this by themselves. They get it from Jesus. Jesus at one point is talking to the disciples of John because they’re trying to determine if Jesus is the Messiah. Why would John and his disciples been concerned about Jesus being a Messiah -- unless they and John thought

¹ Now notice that Jesus did not say, “Didn’t we just see Elijah? Why then it’s taken care of?” They may be asking the question, and the reason it wouldn’t be taken care of, is that they were thinking that Elijah would come *before* the Messiah, and this mount appearance means that he comes *midway* (not before) the Messiah’s ministry. However, since John the Baptist is the Elijah at the start, it is taken care of.

that he, John, was a forerunner for the Messiah?² Jesus replies, “Go and tell John that I am doing all the Messiah stuff.” Then Jesus says, “John is the one Isaiah wrote about as a voice calling in the wilderness.” And at that Mount of Transfiguration story, Jesus replied to Peter’s question by saying, “If you take John to be Elijah, then it all works out as prophesied.” (Mt. 17:12, 13)

Now listen to this quote from C.S. Lewis.³ The children are playing ... even seriously playing ... something like burglars and then *a sound!* What was that? A real burglar??? It is as if the door of the Old Testament had been left open just a crack. And people were playing at Elijah coming with every Seder meal. Then *a sound!* What was that? The story is real??? Then ever so quietly through that door ajar slips in a burning, sober figure and the whole table is bug-eyed!

Then *he slams that door behind him, “Whapp!”* Have you ever had the door in your bedroom just cracked a little and then the furnace comes on or somebody comes in another door and that door-just-cracked whaps shut? Just like that but louder. And the faces at the Seder table say it all, “Oh, my word. It’s really real.”

The door John closes is the Old Testament door. John sat there completely full of the Old Testament but the door he closed was on the Old

² I remember once when I was six and my dad had been away for many weeks. All the pilots were back, sporting beards, and in their orange jump suits. I ran up behind a man I thought was my dad, grabbed his hand, and looked up. Oops, wrong guy! I was startled. John was wondering if he was following the right guy.

³ “It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone....There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: Was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ... suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?”

Testament. We know that because Jesus said that no one born of a woman was greater than John the Baptist. No one greater! But then he says the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he (Luke 7:28).

John was the latest and greatest of the *late* great. ‘I just baptize with water,’ said John. ‘He baptizes with Spirit and fire!’ (Imagine, “I walked to Earl’s Hideaway but he, Neil Armstrong, walked on the moon!” Imagine, “I was a doctor before they knew about germs or had discovered penicillin. I was good but it’s a whole different game now and they are able to do light years more than we could.) The Old Testament closes *and anyone who is touched by Jesus is greater off than anyone before*. See, John is so great but he comes in to close the door on the age that did not live under the ministry of the Messiah and the Spirit and fire. He closes the door on the Old Testament so that Jesus can open the door on the New. That’s why I often describe John the Baptist as the last man before Christmas.

Now I don’t want you to hear just *about* this last man before Christmas but I want you to *hear* him. And what does he say? His whole ministry was to tell everyone to get ready. Agreed? The way he tells them to get ready is ... does he close the door and get a big smile and say, “It’s here and let’s bake some cookies”? No. We are in the mood for that because we see at Christmas a baby and sing about mercy mild. But John says, “Repent.” That means, “Change. Think about your thinking. Think about your lifestyle and get it in line with Elijah, being not something played at but oh my goodness real! Get your thoughts around God being real.”⁴

⁴ It will not do to say that repentance is an Old Testament message and that this is the New. Jesus’ message was, “*Repent* for the Kingdom is here.”

The full prophecy about Elijah is that he comes before the great “and terrible” day of the Lord! Great and terrible.

“It’s coming,” John the Baptist says, and the door behind bounces as it is banged on by the Messiah. John has his backside against it, holding it closed for a moment. “It’s coming.” He adds, “The Messiah is coming. Christmas is coming.” Then maybe he says, “Those advent candles you’ve been lighting in the other room? They’ve caught fire. That is now the refiner’s fire. There’s a blazing fire at the door and it is coming.” Then he turns and touches the door, the way firefighters do to check if there is a fire behind the door, and his fingers sizzle. “It’s coming. The Refiner and his fire.” Christmas is coming. Are you sure you’re ready?? Better get ready.

I heard about forensic computer experts. They are able to retrieve every keystroke and every program and every internet site that a computer has been involved with. Every email you have written on your computer can come to light in a courtroom. John says, “It’s coming. The computer of your life has a court date and is going to be unwrapped.” Not just packages unwrapped, but you! Christmas is coming. Are you sure you’re ready?? Better get ready.

Cousin John, John the Baptist, asks us all, “Are *you* ready for Christmas?”

If every keystroke of your life is going to be known, how can we possibly be ready? Good question. Very good question. And that’s why we need a Savior.

How can we possibly be ready for John the Baptist’s Christmas? Here’s how to be ready. We think of Christmas morning as us unwrapping things but it’s when God unwraps you. When God unwraps you that morning, unwraps every keystroke, ask him to toss away the paper and tape of your sin and shame and find inside a present of you holding on to and

being held on to by the baby Jesus. I don't have any present for you on Christmas morning, O God, and when you unwrap me, throw away my sin and shame and find inside me with Jesus Christ, I pray. Let that be your present. Let that be my present.

He came as a baby because a baby is small and not hard ... and everyone can hold him. Amen?
Amen.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

revjeffwood@gmail.com

www.welovefirst.org

www.facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian