

First Light

Each year, there is a sure signal of summer's arrival – the cicada. Known for its undulating rhythmic chorus that echoes in neighborhoods, greenbelts, forests, and youth camps, these little creatures take up residence and live a short bug's life only to make sure that there is a next generation of cicadas. Lately the news has been “a buzz” with all of the stories of restaurants and confectioners developing recipes for cicada pizza and chocolate-covered cicadas! None of this may ring your dinner bell, but it makes an examination of the strange life of John the Baptist all the more timely. While it's true that John ate wild honey and locusts (which are more like grasshoppers), it's still easy to get hung up on some of his other eccentric practices, like clothing style and living quarters. But when you look at the plan for his life and the special words of his message, you see a man who was born to be the lead spokesman for the coming Messiah and he took that very seriously.

It actually starts in Luke 1, where John's conception was part of a divine plan. Think about it: an angel announced his birth, he lived with Nazirite-like restrictions, his life would be considered great and God himself would approve of him, part of his résumé would include the spirit and power of Elijah, he would have a phenomenal ability to persuade people and he'd be filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born. Pretty lofty credentials. And the purpose for his life? Matthew says, “...to prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him.” And John the Baptist performed his expected duties with discipline, obedience and enormous sacrifice.

Luke 1:11-17 NIV

[11] Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. [12] When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. [13] But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. [14] He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, [15] for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. [16] He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. [17] And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord .”

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Matthew 3:1-12 NIV

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

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, '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 comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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."

Luke 3:10-20 NIV

[10] "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. [11] John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." [12] Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" [13] "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. [14] Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely---be content with your pay." [15] The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. [16] John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [17] His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." [18] And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them. [19] But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, [20] Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

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John the Baptist was so much more than a strange prophet in the wilderness. In spite of his weirdness, he had this uncanny influence which drew people to him. It was as if his message was irresistible. He spoke the truth without wavering, apologies or backtracking, even knowing it might cost him everything.. He never quenched the Holy Spirit and lived his whole life as a voice of God. He was not consumed with the issues of this life and he didn't pay much attention to his press clippings. John had a unique sense of his purpose in life – to awaken the hearts of people back to God and to lift up the name of Christ before everyone. Perhaps when he raised Jesus from the baptismal waters and heard God's booming voice proclaiming Jesus as his Son, he knew his life had been worth the sacrifice.

Maybe when we carry the message of Christ to others we can use some of John's techniques and message as well. We don't need locusts, cicadas, or camel hair jackets, but we are better equipped for the mission when we, 1) spend preparatory time deep in scripture, 2) are open about our own sins and confess them, 3) demonstrate honesty, contentment, integrity and generosity, and 4) recognize the constant need to be submissive to Jesus as our Lord and King. These are really pretty basic Christian practices, but when you look at the interesting life of John the Baptist, they seem anything but basic. His admonitions showed the straight path to the Savior.

So, the next time you hear that summertime rhythmic buzzing in the trees outside, think of it as a gentle reminder of the life of John. Take a moment and offer a prayer to our Father that you also might be that same path to the Savior for someone else.