



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Easy Answers

Luke 1: 5-20

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The Bible raises many deep mysterious questions, questions about the nature of being, about the meaning of life, questions that could occupy the finest minds 'til Kingdom come. And the questions I'll raise today? Well, they're nothing like that. All my questions today have easy answers. My questions are about John the Baptist, and they are: who, what, where, and when, and for good measure, why. Let's start with who. Who was John the Baptist?

Easy enough, if you read the gospel of Luke; anyway, you can't miss it — Chapter One. The very first story Luke tells is about John the Baptist. He was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The miraculous nature of Jesus' birth is well known, but John, too, was someone whose birth was foretold by angelic pronouncement. John the Baptist would grow up to be a powerful preacher and teacher. In fact, he spoke with such authority that many of the devout at that time thought he might be the Messiah. People's expectations of John the Baptist were that high.

That takes care of who John was. Let's move on to when: When did John the Baptist start his ministry? That's easy, too, if you know where to look: John began his ministry in the year 29. We know because the story of how John got started is told in the gospel of Luke, Chapter 3.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, THAT'S when the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah.

What a mouthful! Who tells time this way? I mean, it does allow one to cross-check the dates and come up with our when: the year 29. But we also learn something else: the Holy Land was divided. There were so many borders crossing and crisscrossing that Luke has to list more than half a dozen separate

and competing rulers within the Holy Land, one ruler in this spot and another ruler just a few miles away.

There were deep-seated ethnic and political and military conflicts between these different small states, and the borders were dangerous — the site of skirmishes and thievery. It was a time of division and danger, so most people wisely tried to stay well away from the borders; people tried to stay deep within their territory, surrounded solely by their own people. That's what the Holy Land was like in the year 29, that's what it was like when John the Baptist got started.

So that's when, how about where? Where did John the Baptist begin his ministry?

That one is easy, too; again the Bible is doing all the hard work for me today. Luke 3 says that John went "into all the region around the Jordan River," preaching and attracting quite a following. But you have to understand, this isn't just, "Oh, John was over by the river." Remember those disputed dangerous borders I was talking about? The Jordan River was a border, it was THE border, and virtually its entire length was a disputed border. If John wanted to follow the Jordan River north, he would begin in a land called Idumea, then cross into Judea, from there the river turns toward Samaria, and from Samaria into the Decapolis, from the Decapolis into Perea, then from Perea back into the Decapolis for a while before dead-ending in Galilee, Galilee whose freshwater lake was claimed by no fewer than five mini-states. John was preaching in all the region around the Jordan River, and it is easier to count the number of borders that he DIDN'T cross than the ones he did.

So that's the who, when, and where of John the Baptist's ministry — he worked at hotly contested borders during a time of stark and dangerous division. How about what? What was John the Baptist doing? Well, that's the easiest one yet, it's right in his name — John the Baptist was baptizing people. John was baptizing people in the Jordan River, offering anyone who had an earnest desire for a fresh start to simply begin their life anew in the eyes of God. Whatever mistakes they may have made in the past — a chance to begin again. Whatever stories they had told about themselves — a chance to write a new story. Baptism was like an open door, leading from what had been to what might yet be.

That's the who, when, where, and what of John the Baptist. That leaves us with why? Why was John doing any of this?

Why is normally the hard question, but like I said, all the questions I'm answering today are easy, because the gospel of Luke tells us why. John was baptizing people to prepare the way of the Lord. John was baptizing people to prepare them for the coming of Jesus Christ, to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. John offered baptism, in the service of joy. Every valley was to be lifted up and every mountain brought low — joy. He was giving people a fresh start, a new beginning as a marked people — joy. John was marked with the sign and seal of the God who loves them — joy. John was preparing the way of the Lord, building a highway for God at a time when people needed God more than ever — joy.

The third Sunday of Advent is when we as Christians place joy at the very heart of our anticipation. And joyful work is what John the Baptist calls to us: to prepare the way of the Lord! The Lord is coming; deliverance is on its way — what joy! Yet the world must be prepared for joy. This is still a time of remarkable division, just like it was for John. And this is still a world of hotly contested borders of faith, politics, and economics, just like it was for John. And so we must look to John for what we ought to offer a world in need of joy. Must offer baptism: that is new possibilities, fresh starts, new beginnings that could not have been imagined.

The world will never be the same as it was a year ago. But we can live into a world full of new beginnings. May it be so. Amen.