



What Child Is This?

Luke 1:57-66

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My name is Anthony Ballard, and I'm the Director of Discipleship here. It's a little quiet. Hey, let me say, good morning, everybody. Yeah, now we're feeling it. Alright, good. So, Anthony Ballard, Director of Discipleship.

Today's verse comes from Luke 1:57: *When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah. But his mother spoke up and said, 'No, he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.' Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea, people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him.*

We are currently in a sermon series this Advent season called *Questions That Christmas Asks*. We are looking at the various passages in the Christmas story where people are asking questions about God and also what God is doing right now. The question we have today is, "What child is this?" Or another way of saying it, "What child will this become?"

That's a Christmas song that maybe most of you have heard before—*What child is this?* When I first read this verse in the Christmas context, I was confused because the song, as you know, is about Jesus, but the verse is not about Jesus. It's about his cousin, a man named John the Baptist. Yet, because of the circumstances of his birth, we know that John

is seen by his community as going to be a special child. He's not going to be a normal child—he's probably going to be the *most* special child, the most amazing child who ever lived. That's what they're thinking at this point.

Three months ago, my wife gave birth to our daughter, Hannah Naya, and I think she's the most special, most amazing child. And I know we all think our kids are the most special and amazing, right? Don't we think so? But you know, I've also been coming to the realization over the past three months that my family and I have been putting extra levels of greatness and expectation onto her, even though she hasn't really done anything to deserve it yet.

If she does anything earlier than expected, we go, "Oh man, this baby is a genius!" And now she's starting to talk a lot, so we're like, "Oh, she's probably going to be a singer or have her own podcast show!" Even while my wife was pregnant, we had these expectations. We had this app that tracks the pregnancy cycle, and it would tell us at certain times of the day to start counting the kicks. It would say you should feel at least 10 kicks every hour or so. If the baby only kicked seven times, I'd start to freak out: "Oh, is she okay? Why isn't she kicking enough?" Expectations, right?

But because of the circumstances of John's birth, the community asked questions. This child was going to be special. He wasn't going to be some obscure person on the sidelines of life. And also, in Luke 7, Jesus himself says of John, "Among those born of women, none are greater than John the Baptist."

So, our question today is: What child is this? What child is John the Baptist, particularly? To recap the last couple of weeks of sermons, we learned a lot about John's parents—Elizabeth and Zechariah. They were two faithful people to God, and God called them to be a part of His rescue mission for the world. They were old and beyond childbearing years, yet God came to them and said they would bear a child and name him John.

While Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth were both pregnant, Scripture tells us that John, even in the womb, leapt when he sensed that the Messiah was near, even before they were born. Jesus and John were cousins, and the Gospel of Luke makes it clear that their lives were going to parallel each other. He tells their birth stories side by side. Both babies were to be announced by angel messengers, both were the result of miraculous pregnancies and births, and both would have a significant role in God's future plan of salvation. Their parents, Mary and Zechariah, responded to God's goodness with songs of worship and praise.

One thing Luke makes very clear is that, while both babies are special, Jesus is the greater of the two. You might get the idea when you read this story, like I did, that Jesus and John were going to be some type of dynamic duo team. They were going to be like a buddy-cop movie, but at church.

This picture here is of LeBron James and Dwyane Wade, probably one of the greatest sports pictures of all time. If you're not a basketball person, what's happening here is that they're making a fast break down the court. Dwyane Wade has the ball and, without looking, passes it to LeBron James, who dunks the ball. The special thing is that Dwyane Wade doesn't look back. He doesn't need to check if everything is alright because he knows that LeBron is reliable and trustworthy.

So, in my natural mind, when I'm reading this, I think, "This is going to be Jesus and John's ministry together. Israel has been down for 400 years, but we're back! Let's go! Jesus, the Messiah, and John, let's do this thing!"

Verse 80 says: *And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.*

So basically, while John was growing in the spirit, he also got weird. The Scripture says that he lived in the wilderness, ate honey and locusts, wore a grass skirt, and had a leather belt. This was not typical behavior in their time. Later in his life, he ends up in prison and, spoiler alert, he gets killed. He gets beheaded, and when it happens, it's unceremonious.

He gets killed by a king at the request of a princess. And of the four gospels, Luke gives the most details about John's birth. He really sets him up as a major player in this whole long story. But in this same gospel, John dies off-screen—well, off-screen in Bible terms. It's so fast that it's like a blink-and-you-miss-it verse. It was so hard for me to find. I was looking through all of my Bibles trying to find this place. It was so difficult that I had to ask ChatGPT, "Where did John the Baptist die?" And no, I did not write the sermon with ChatGPT, okay? I really did the work.

But if the Lord's hand was with John from birth, how could God just let him die? Did his life matter? How could someone who had so much purpose and so many miracles at the beginning die without more special moments?

You know, the answer is that John did have his special moments. He had several, in fact, but he had them early in his life. John knew from the beginning that his purpose was to point others to Jesus. Yet people around him—those in his life—were trying to make him more than he was supposed to be.

In John 1, it says that the Pharisees questioned John and asked, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" So John replied, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness: Make straight the way for the Lord."

The Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" These people were trying to put him on a

pedestal that was not meant for John. The Messiah was the one who would redeem Israel, save God's people, and rule the world. Elijah was the great prophet who didn't die but went straight to heaven and was expected to come back. The Prophet was someone Moses spoke about in Deuteronomy, a prophet greater than he.

Any of these titles, John could have claimed for himself, because of the work he was doing and the signs he was displaying. But he didn't claim any of them. And he didn't do this out of false humility either. John knew his role. Everyone had special expectations of him, but John knew his part in the bigger story.

John says, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John's role was to be a herald. A herald is not a word we use much today. It's not *Herald*, the person you might know, H-A-R-O-L-D. A herald is an official messenger who brings good news or brings news. A herald is also a person or thing viewed as a sign that something is about to happen.

John and Jesus were coming to prepare and lead God's people for something. It was John who would proclaim God's salvation, but only Jesus would take His people to it. And all of us who are Christians have the same role as John: to live a life that points others to Jesus. And that is the point of my sermon. I could stop now, but I have more to say.

Okay, but the question is: what if a life's primary purpose is to point others to Jesus? Would that be enough for you? As a new parent, I'm asking that of myself. Is raising a daughter whose main purpose in life is to point others to Jesus enough? Can I make that exciting enough for her?

John was the herald for the Messiah, which was the most noble, most heroic task he had. Jesus said, "Among those born of women, none are greater than John the Baptist." And he continues to say in that same verse, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John." This means that a Christian who's new to the faith, or just figuring things out, even if they're unsure about anything, the least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest in our natural world.

John was a godly man, and he had a purpose. Yet, even he, this godly man, had a moment of doubt and uncertainty. In Luke 7, it says that when John, who was in prison at the time, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Up to this point, John had baptized Jesus, and the story says that when John baptized Jesus, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. So what was happening here in this moment? Why was John wavering a little bit? This was the herald—the one who was supposed to point people to Jesus—and now, in prison, he's wondering, "Did I do the

right thing? Did I live my life's purpose correctly? Was Jesus the right person I was supposed to be pointing to all this time?"

The important thing to note here is that John didn't waver in his purpose. He just wondered if Jesus was the right person he was supposed to be pointing to. And some of you are here today, and some of you online now, are probably thinking, "Man, I don't know if Jesus is the one worth following." Maybe you're following some other philosophies or practices, and you're just here because it's Christmas, and your family made you come. You have questions, right? But John asked a similar question: "Are you the one, or should I look somewhere else?"

And guess how Jesus responds. He doesn't respond by saying, "Oh, if you just believe a little harder, try harder, you'll know that I'm the way." He doesn't say that. Instead, Jesus shares his resume. He says, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." These were the signs and miracles that only the Messiah could perform.

This brings us back to our question: What child is this? What child is this Jesus, specifically? If you were to go to Bellevue Square today or any day and ask seven people, "Who is Jesus Christ?" they would likely give you seven different answers. Maybe he's a teacher? A prophet? A great leader? An advocate for justice? Well, I think he's actually all of those things. He's just not only one of those things. Because if he's only one of those things, then we have to leave out so much more about what Jesus said about himself.

A couple of years ago, I was in an Uber ride, and the man who picked me up initiated a conversation. I hated this because it was 4 a.m. and I was on my way to the airport—I didn't want to talk. I would have sat there quietly the whole time, but he actually led the conversation to faith. The man happened to be a Muslim, and it wasn't a casual conversation either. I think he wanted to convert me to Islam, and I was like, "Oh man, this is intense." But he didn't know that I had an *Uno reverse card*—I was going to evangelize him back.

So we were ping-ponging back and forth with questions and comments—no arguments, just questions. He went on about the Muslim faith and the virtues of it. Then I told him, "I'm a Christian, and I follow Jesus." He said, "Oh good, you know, us Muslims, we believe in Jesus too. We respect him; we think he's one of our most important prophets. And we Muslims probably obey the commands of Jesus more than Christians do." I said, "Dang, man." But I found myself agreeing with him a little, maybe because it was 4 a.m. and I wasn't fully awake, but I said, "Yeah, yeah, maybe we are the same. We believe in the same God and both respect Jesus."

But then it hit me—I didn't totally believe that. I don't just believe Jesus is a prophet; I believe he is God. God in human form, who died for my sins and ours, who resurrected from the dead, and is coming back again to save and rule the world.

And then he said, "Okay, yeah, we don't believe the same things." To me, that's a major difference. These aren't things I'm making up in the moment; these are things Jesus actually said about himself.

The conversation ended, and it was very friendly. Neither of us switched religions, but he dropped me off at the airport, and I went on my way.

But I think for me, when I think back to that, more than I wanted to be right in that conversation, I actually wanted him to think that I was crazy. And the reason why I wanted him to think I was crazy, is because the man that he thinks is a teacher or a prophet, I actually think is God. That's kind of wild, don't you think?

So, I sing songs about this guy and worship him and pray, and sometimes I start tearing up thinking about a guy who's a teacher. That's pretty weird.

At some point in our lives, and maybe you've already had it, you're going to have these faith and life conversations. What's it all about?

And if you're someone who has questions about your faith and about Jesus, I want to invite you personally now to Alpha in January. Alpha is a program that we'll have on Wednesday nights where we'll have these conversations—judgment-free conversations. Bring whatever you have, and we'll do it all without the aim of being right. And it's perfect if you're new to faith in Jesus.

If you're a middle schooler, high schooler, or adult, it doesn't matter, all are welcome. There will be child care and dinner as well for you to enjoy. I told the Alpha team that, hey, for dinner, let's have some of the best church food people have ever had. Like, best food, period.

So, Alpha in January—I'd love for you to come and just let's come with our questions and talk.

If you were to ask, again, seven people who Jesus is, you would get seven different opinions. In his book *Mere Christianity*, which was published in 1952, C.S. Lewis wrestled with this idea about choosing your own opinion of Jesus. He says this:

"I'm trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. You must make

your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else he's a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let's not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that up to us. He did not intend to."

Lewis says that you must choose. And for me, the longer that I'm a Christian, the more I actually agree with this. Because when I read the Bible, Jesus says so many absolutely outlandish things that I just can't take casually.

So, this brings us back to John's question in Luke 7: *Are you the one who is to come? Are you the Messiah? Are you the Lord? Are you God with us? Or should we expect someone else?*

So Jesus replied, *Go back and report to John what you've seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.*

And then he says something else: *Blessed are those who do not stumble on account of me.*

We can bring to Jesus our questions, our doubts, our uncertainties about who he is. But we have to be ready for him to give an answer. We have to be ready.

And so this song asks a question: *What child is this? Who is this child?* But that same song also gives us an answer. The lyrics say: *This is Christ the King.*

And if you need a reminder, or maybe if you don't know, Jesus Christ—Christ is not his last name. In fact, he doesn't really have a last name. Christ is his title, and it's a title that only he gets. He's the only one who has it, because it's a title that means *Anointed One, Savior, Lord, and King.*

He is Christ the King because it's something that he was born into. Before he could do anything of note, the angels appeared and said: *Behold, I bring you good news that will bring joy to all people. This day, born in the city of David, is born to you a Savior who is Christ the Lord.*

He is Christ the King because he was born that way. But he's also Christ the King because he earned it. It's a title he earned with his life. He lived a full life of complete obedience to God the Father. In all of his actions, it says that he was tempted in every way—in every way that you and I get tempted—but he did not sin.

And he took that same sinless life, and he gave it as a sacrifice of obedience to God the Father, where he died on a cross for me, and he died on a cross for you. I'm not going to get choked up, because I didn't last service.

So, he died on a cross for us, so every sin that I've ever done, he took it on himself, and that's how he earned his title, Christ the King. And he's Christ the King because, while he died, he also rose himself up from the dead.

And now it says that he's in heaven, and he rules from a throne over things seen and unseen. And guess what, guys? He's coming back again. And he's going to come back, and everything that's still wrong in me, that's wrong in you, he's going to make it right. Everything that's wrong in our world, he's going to fix.

The psalm says that he breaks the bronze bow. He calls his wars to cease. He is Christ the King because he earned it. God now has him set at the highest place. Scripture tells us that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess one day that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So, you might be thinking, *Man, I have bad knees, how can I bow before him?* Well, he's a healer too. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will acknowledge one day that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So, what child is this? What child is he? He is Christ the King.

In John's purpose for the Messiah's first coming, now is our work for his second coming—and that is to prepare the way for the Lord. So, with our whole lives, with our whole being, we live out this mandate that John had: to prepare the way of the Lord.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you invite us into your mission. Thank you, God, that you are so good, that you love us so much, that you would send your Son to give his life for us. And you don't just stop there—you make us clean and you make us pure.

And Lord, thank you that you are Christ the King, that your name is the name above all. And Lord, that you're going to make everything in our world, everything that keeps us up at night, you're going to fix it, and you're already doing it now.

So, Lord, we ask you to— we join our voices, our prayers with the prayers of saints of centuries past, and we say: *Come, Lord Jesus*. Come, Lord Jesus, and make it all right. Come, Lord Jesus, and do what only you can do as the Messiah and as Christ the King.

We pray this in your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- John took a secondary role to Jesus. What does it look like to let Jesus take the lead in your life?
- Read Matthew 14. With such a miraculous birth, how then does John's death shape your view of his role in God's salvation plan? Does it?
- In your opinion, why does it matter to know who Jesus truly is, rather than what he can be made to be?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.