



“Voices of Advent”

By Professor Matthew L. Skinner

Session 2: The Voice of John the Baptist (December 7, 2025)

Introduction

Display Image of the Isenheim Altarpiece (painted by Germans Nikolaus Hagenauer and Matthias Grunewald in 1512-1516; now displayed in the Unterlinden Museum in France)

Opening Questions:

- Why is this art, as Skinner says, an “accurate visual summary of the main thing that the New Testament writers want you to know about John the Baptist”?
- As Skinner notes, John wasn’t present at Jesus’s crucifixion, having been executed before Jesus was. Why has the artist included John in the scene?
- Skinner writes, “People like John urge us to examine everything more closely.” Who is someone who urged you to examine something or someone more closely for evidence of God’s presence or activity?
- When, if ever, have you urged someone else to examine someone or something more closely for glimpses of God? What happened?

Opening Prayer

Holy God, you sent your servant John to prepare your people for the Savior. Send your Spirit upon us now, we pray, as we study his ministry and listen to his message. Move us to know and do you will with urgency, as John sought to know and do it, that we may more clearly see your salvation bringing mountains low and making rough places plain, in this world and in our lives. Amen.

Session 2 Video – “The Voice of John the Baptist”

- Which of Skinner’s statements most interested, intrigued, surprised, or confused you? Why?
- What questions does this video segment raise for you?

“Meeting John the Baptist”

- Let’s brainstorm a list of everything we know or can remember about John the Baptist.

“John in the Gospels”

Scripture Focus – Mark 1:1-8

- Why does Mark begin “the good news of Jesus Christ” with a report about John the Baptist?
- What other biblical stories about God and God’s people in the wilderness do you remember? What personal experiences do you have of being in a wilderness? Do these experiences inform your understanding of the setting for John’s ministry?
- John’s clothing (vs. 6) resembles that of the important prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). How does Malachi 4:5-6 reflect some Jewish expectations about Elijah’s place in God’s plans and promises for the future? Why might John have styled his appearance after Elijah’s?
- Who and what does John tell those who come to be baptized to expect after him (verses 7-8)? What do you think John means, and why?

Scripture Focus – Matthew 3:1-12

- How is Matthew’s account of John’s ministry like and unlike Mark’s?
- Why does John criticize the religious leaders who come to him for baptism (verses 7-9)? Why is it important to remember John is a devout Jew critiquing other devout Jews?
- As Skinner explains, the word *repentance* in New Testament Greek (*metanoia*) “does not refer to contrition or feeling self-blaming regret about one’s behavior” but to “taking on a new perspective or changed mind.” How does this definition affect your response to calls for repentance?

- Skinner says John urges people “to perceive the great discrepancy between how things are and how things ought to be, in God’s merciful assessment of our reality.” Do you hear mercy in John’s message? How can knowing and telling the truth about the gap between “what is” and “what ought to be” be a mercy?
- John’s “urgency and warnings reveal his exasperation about a society that isn’t living up to what it can be or is being held back from what it can be.” In what areas of your society do you share John’s dissatisfaction with the world as it is? How, if at all, are you turning that dissatisfaction and exasperation into action?

Scripture Focus – Luke 3:1-18

- How is Luke’s account of John’s ministry like and unlike Mark’s and Matthew’s?
- Why does Luke take time to situate John in a wider historical and political context (verse 1 – 2)?
- Tax collectors and soldiers worked for the Roman Empire, with “great latitude in being able to exploit their positions for personal gain,” writes Skinner. What do you think about John’s instructions to them (verses 12 – 14)? What do you imagine others in the crowd thought about what John told the tax collectors and soldiers, and why?
- “John’s not paralyzed by the magnitude of what we call structural or systemic injustice. He calls for resisting it through basic decency and faithfulness.” What are some specific ways in which you demonstrate basic decency and faithfulness? Do you tend to think of these actions as part of your discipleship?

Scripture Focus – John 1:6-9, 19-28, 29-34

- What is John's main mission, according to this Gospel (verses 6-8)? How does baptizing activity support this mission (verse 31)?
- Why do think this Gospel, unlike the others, does not include or refer to a scene of Jesus being baptized?
- In the Fourth Gospel, says Skinner, "John the Baptist's voice offers a statement of certainty: We've found our Messiah." When, if ever, have you felt such certainty about someone and who they are to you? Who, if anyone, has declared to you who Jesus is with such certainty? Have you ever felt such certainty about Jesus yourself?

"Are You the One?"

Scripture Focus – Matthew 11:2-6.

- Why do you think John wanted to ask Jesus this question? Have you ever asked, or wanted to ask, the same question of Jesus?
- Skinner calls Jesus's activity "a reckoning of sorts." How so? How, if at all, do you see this activity occurring today, and would you attribute it to Jesus? Why or why not?
- How can this story about John's question help us "live on the brink," in Skinner's words – in the "in-betweenness" of God's promises on the one hand and our experience of the world on the other?

Closing

Skinner writes, “Those candles on the Advent wreaths do more than provide stubborn resistance against encroaching shadows. Flames in the Bible symbolize purification and wholeness. Moreover, they symbolize God’s presence. The tiny fires contain more power than they appear to, for they become to me a lighthouse of that active hope, vaguely illuminating in my mind a future that I’m still trying to see.”

- What “encroaching shadows” concern you at this time? What specific actions can you take to light a “tiny fire” against it?

“Like John, we ourselves are not the light, but we are called to testify to the true Light, who enlightens everyone, who is coming into the world.”

Closing Prayer (drawn from the hymn “*Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*”)

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver;
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

“Voices of Advent”

Session 3: The Voices of Mary, Zechariah, and The Gospel of John

Sunday, December 14 4:00 PM
