

John the Baptist

Sitting on the altar next to our excellent cantor, Jim Mrozak, I find myself gazing at many of the stained glass depictions that tower above the altar. They are all incredible to look upon, but the one that has fascinated me the most is the depiction of John the Baptist baptizing our Lord Jesus in the Jordan River.

I make my living as a speaker—a corporate trainer—and each year, I am on my feet, in front of thousands of trainees, speaking about subjects like Customer Service, Patient Experience, Communication, as well as many leadership development topics. I engage my audiences the same way that Jesus did: by telling stories—personal experiences and observations. All my life, I have always admired great public speakers—speakers who have the ability to grab an audience's attention and regale them with stories that enflame, illuminate and inspire. Speakers like Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Martin Luther King, and Norman Vincent Peale.



Gazing upon the Baptist, I cannot help but marvel at what a speaker he must have been. I can almost hear his booming voice ringing out:

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!

Long before TV and mass media, centuries before YouTube and viral videos, John emerged from the desert, having been forged by God and filled with a zeal that would prepare the crowds for the coming of the Lord. John, the improbable child of Zachary and Elizabeth, was certainly a child destined for great things. And the neighbors in the hill country of Judea asked in wonder:

What child shall this be? For the hand of the Lord was upon him!

I think one of the most excellent portrayals of the Baptist was courtesy of Michael York in the television mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth*. York captured the passion and the zeal and the urgency of the Baptist, and none in the crowd, even the educated and cynical Pharisees, could deny that he was a prophet, one of the mightiest prophets, sent to earth.

I can only imagine how he held his audiences spellbound-this wild-eyed messenger, who was clad in a camel-haired tunic and existing on locusts and wild honey. For John was no-nonsense, incorruptible and uncompromising. For it was written:

"The WORD of God came to John, the son of Zachary, in the desert. And he went into all the regions about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and saying *repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* For this, is he who was spoken of through Isaias the Prophet, when he said:

I am the voice of one crying in the desert, make ready the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked ways shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all mankind shall see the salvation of God."

John was the messenger, the herald of the arrival of Christ. Sadly, John's time was brief, as he knew it would be. Perhaps this only added to the urgency of his message:

"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Still, I wonder what part he would have played in our Lord's public Mission, had he not been executed. Would he have been the first Pope of the Catholic Church? If so, what part would Peter have played? There are numerous possibilities. But to this day, John lives on in eternity, and his key role as The Baptizer, is captured in the stained glass that surrounds the altar at St. Louis!

We, the congregation of St. Louis, share the promise of life eternal, of entering the Kingdom of Heaven, And should I be lucky enough to enter

that oft-spoken about paradise, after seeking out members of my family, high on my list of those I want to meet is not only Fr. Mack and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, but quite possibly, the greatest speaker and orator known to man: John-the Baptist!