

**Made to Be a Light in the Darkness**  
**Luke 1:13-17**

How many of us made New Year's resolutions?

We resolved to lose 15 pounds or read a book a month or watch less TV, spend time with family or exercise more? Maybe we want to save some money or cook at home more and eat out less. Maybe we want to start oil painting or limiting our use of social media or take a trip to Europe. Maybe we want to read all the way through the Bible or have a daily devotion time or join a small group or Sunday School.

No matter what resolution we choose, there is something driving it.

We want to be better than we are. We believe, there is untapped and unseen greatness within us and we are determined to find it.

We all want to be better. We all want to find that greatness that lies dormant within each and everyone of us.

But if our ability to keep our New Year's resolutions for more than a week or the number of self-help books available to purchase is any indication, we struggle with ever finding this opaque yet omnipresent greatness.

But we all feel this urge to better, to be great, because God made us that way.

Jesus once made an outrageous claim about John the Baptist. Jesus said, "There is no one born of women that is greater than John the Baptist." What Jesus meant by saying that was to exclude Himself who was not born in a natural way. Jesus was conceived in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. But of all the non-Divine human beings out there, everyone who has ever occupied a womb, no one is greater than John the Baptist.

Talk about something you could put on a resume or the cover of a book.

"No one is greater than this guy," said God's only Son.

But there is one exception, Jesus said. He did say someone else, a particular kind of person is greater than John—meaning they are equipped, endowed, gifted, indwelt with more power than John. Jesus said even the least person in the Kingdom of God is greater than John.

And what Jesus means by that if we are a part of God's Kingdom, meaning that the Holy Spirit of the Living God lives and moves and has His being in us, if we are what the book of First Corinthians calls a temple for the Holy Spirit—then we share a greatness with John the Baptist to bend the world to the shape of the Kingdom of God. And Jesus called him the greatest who ever lived.

But does it feel that way?

Do any of us feel great this morning? Do any of us feel like we are having a Kingdom impact? Some of us surely do. I see it in our small groups and Sunday School and in families being repaired, lives

changed, our mission work around the world and our local community partners. If First Presbyterian Church of Edmond was gone tomorrow. If we just closed our doors, Edmond was notice.

So there is some Kingdom impact, some greatness here.

But it's not enough collectively, not with the Holy Spirit of the Living God, living moving and active in all of us. And there are some of us when I ask the question, "Do you feel great? What is your Kingdom impact?" will struggle to answer.

And the Church today as a whole is perhaps less influential than it has been in any time in 200 years at least in this country. Our Kingdom impact, given our resources, is shockingly meager.

I believe we underestimate John the Baptist who against the powers of Hell was a one-man wrecking crew.

Could looking at the life of John help us recover at least some of what we have lost? Could taking a deep dive into the history of his life, help us open the windows of our soul to power of the Holy Spirit and help us recover just a taste of the Kingdom greatness Jesus intends?

Obviously, I believe the answer is "Yes" or else we wouldn't be doing this sermon series.

The answer is "Yes" because we share so much with John. And today we talk about our shared mission with John.

John's mission was first explained to his father well before John was born and right around the time he was conceived. John came from a family of priests on both sides of his family. His mother came from a family of priests. Her name was Elizabeth and she was also cousin to Jesus' mother Mary—which made John and Jesus second cousins.

John's father was also a priest. His name was Zechariah. And the Bible tells that Zechariah and Elizabeth were fully devoted followers of the Lord. Luke says:

**They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.**

#### **Luke 1:6**

In the next breath Luke tells us something else about Elizabeth and Zechariah. They were both old and they had no kids at all because Elizabeth was barren.

And Zechariah got the shock of his life one day when he was performing his priestly duty. He had been chosen by lot to enter into the temple and burn incense. And he was chosen to go alone. Even though he was chosen by lot it was still an honor because very few people ever got to a place where they could lay a hand on the temple's outer walls, let alone walk in the 20 foot tall gold doors.

And Zechariah walked in those giant gold doors all alone while a crowd of people prayed outside. Suddenly, Zechariah became aware that he was not alone. But it was no human being. It was an angel. Specifically, it was the angel Gabriel who is God's messenger, the herald of the Lord. Just six months later Gabriel showed up in Nazareth to tell Mary that she would conceive and bear Jesus—God's only Son and the Savior of the World.

But six months before that the angel Gabriel stood before the solitary priest Zechariah and told him that despite the fact that his wife Elizabeth was barren and had been unable to have children for their entire marriage and despite the fact that they were both old and beyond normal child-bearing years, that God had heard their prayers for a child. More than likely these prayers had been prayed for years, decades even. And this child was not just going to be any child, he was born with a very important role. God had a plan for his life:

**But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.**

**Luke 1:13-17**

So, right there is that word again “great.” Gabriel told Zechariah that his son would be ‘great before the Lord.’ But that’s not all. His son John—that’s what they were told to name him a name that means graced by God—would be filled with the Holy Spirit. And from the very early days of his life he would live differently, set apart by God for glorious purpose. And John would, by the power of the Holy Spirit flowing in him and through him just like the greatest prophets of old, he would change the hearts of women and men, children. The sinful and disobedient would come to a place of obedience and wisdom and justice. And this was all directed toward preparing a people, making them ready, for the coming of the Lord.

During this entire sermon series we are going to keep coming back to this description of John’s call and our call.

What I want you to hear in that description, that glorious description, absolute bursting with purpose is that there is nothing essentially different in what God purposed John to do than what He purposes you and me to do. We essentially have the same mission as John and God fulfills this mission in us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

And that may sound incredible to us. But we can boil this down to three things.

**First, we are to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

**Second, we are to live differently and call other people to live differently too.**

**Third, we are to point to Jesus.**

Again, this may sound incredible to us. And it should because this is glorious, glorious, glorious. That God would call someone like you and me to this kind of amazing work—to this kind of greatness.

I would not blame if you were a little skeptical. You should be. Heck, I'm a pastor and I can't hardly believe that God would use someone like me with all my faults and failures and eccentricities and outright sin and rebellion against God to be a live in the power of the Holy Spirit, live differently and call others to live differently too and to point to Jesus.

It's really incredible because I am spectacularly unqualified.

Certainly when Zechariah first heard it, when he heard that he and his wife Elizabeth, in their 'advanced age' that their long-standing prayers would be answered and they would have a child, even he balked. Even Zechariah who we are told was righteous and blameless, following all the Lord's commandments, could not believe the Lord's incredible promise.

**And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."**

**Luke 1:18**

God's promises are supposed to be incredible. God's promises are supposed to be unbelievable. That is what you get from an all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal God who created everything we will ever see with a simple word. If that God did not make incredible, unbelievable, absurd sounding promises—then what kind of God would He be? He'd be a lot like us then and really not worthy of worship.

But know this. Jesus is worthy of our worship. He demonstrates that daily.

And the angel Gabriel who was delivering one of these outrageous, outlandish promises when he was confronted with Zechariah's disbelief determined to show him that God's Word is true and His promises are sure.

**And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."**

**Luke 1:19-20**

And Zechariah was made unable to speak for nine months and eight days. For the entirety of his wife's pregnancy  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a year, Zechariah was unable to utter a word. And I am not going to tell a single joke about this at all. But I will say there are many husbands who have opened their mouth unwisely during that blessed time and later wished God had shut their mouth for them.

And so John was miraculously born and all of Elizabeth and Zechariah's family and friends and neighbors rejoiced and gave thanks and were so very pleased for them. And on the eighth day after John was born when he and his mother were purified and he was circumcised, all those well-wishers said aren't you going to name after his father, aren't you going to name him Zechariah. And Elizabeth following the Gabriel's direction said, "No, his name is John."

And everyone objected at the name of John because it wasn't a family name. But Elizabeth and Zechariah, nine months and eight days later, had come to believe fully in the promises of the Lord. They listened to Him, they trusted Him, no matter how outrageous or outlandish was His word. And Elizabeth had to feel a little chagrined that when she said that John's name was going to be John that the whole assembly of friends and well-wishers, neighbors and family who had come to celebrate with them

turned to Zechariah, who hadn't spoken a word for nine months and eight days, and asked him "What do you want him to be called?"

By the way, a smart man, in this circumstance, defers to his wife. In no way shape or form do you ever show up your wife in front of a crowd.

And Zechariah was a smart man.

But more importantly he was faithful and he believed God's promises. Zechariah gestured for tablet and he wrote on the tablet:

**His name is John.**

**Luke 1:63**

And that is where we get the title for this sermon series. As the Church we share so much with John.

Zechariah's scribblings on the tablet settled the name debate once and for all. And immediately when Zechariah wrote those words, he could speak again and with his now working mouth he began to bless and praise God and everyone was filled with wonder and amazement and they all took note of what had happened.

**And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.**

**Luke 1:66**

Needless to say it was an amazing beginning to John's life and it set a tone for his entire existence.

Of course, we all have a story. And our story, because we are familiar with it, may seem routine. It might seem ordinary, like nothing special at all.

But it isn't. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are a living marvel. God made you be masterpiece. God made you to know the greatness of the Kingdom of Heaven and not only to be participant in that greatness but to be a proclaimer of it as well. You are set apart.

You are given a power by which to live—the Holy Spirit of the Living God.

You are given a way to live—differently from the world and to call others to live differently too.

You are given a message to proclaim—to point to Jesus and His coming.

And there is just something so clarifying about seeing our life in this way. Sin has a way of making these fundamental questions about our life confusing. Sin has a way of muddying the waters. But the Gospel is clarifying and illuminating and the more we live out of the power of the Holy Spirit, the more conviction in God's truth grows and make our way simpler.

Notice I didn't say easier. One of things we will see is that John didn't have an easy life. He lived in the wilderness for most of his life. He ran afoul of the powers of the day. He saw his ministry wither and fade when its u He died in But he had a great life, an impactful life, a life that made a difference for the Kingdom. And we are wired for that. We are made that. It is the deep longing of our life.

And we settle far too often for far too less.

The British apologist C.S. Lewis put it like this:

**Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.**

Here is how Zechariah, as soon as he could speak, described how his infant son's life would go:

**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

**Luke 1:76-79**

And here is what I want you to keep in mind—none of this was John's doing. He did not