

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Note that verses 18 - 20 are omitted in the lectionary reading. These three verses refer to John's later imprisonment at the hands of Herod Antipas because of John's condemnation of Antipas' marriage to Herodias.

As mentioned in a previous message, most modern Christians are surprised to learn that in their lifetimes, John had a longer ministry than did Jesus, was more well-known, and was more popular. We have an excellent first-century source concerning John in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (from *Antiquities*, 18.116-119).

But to some of the Jews, it seemed that the destruction of Herod's army by God was indeed very just, God exacting satisfaction for John who was named "the Baptist." For Herod killed him, although he was a good man and commanded the Jews to come together by using baptism, if they were practicing virtue, [namely] deeds both of righteousness toward others and piety towards God. For in this way baptism would appear acceptable to [God], if they used it not as a pardon for some [of their] sins, but as a purification for the body, the soul having previously been made clean by righteous deeds. And when others were gathered around [John], lifted to ecstasy by listening to his words, Herod—worried lest such great persuasion might lead to some instance of rebellion (for they seemed to be doing everything according to [John's] counsel)—thought it much better to destroy him, seizing John before some innovation arose from the changes happening on his account, than to change his mind later after falling into difficulties. So John, having been brought in chains to the aforementioned Machaerus, was there executed for the suspicions of Herod; but to the Jews, the verdict on John was that God willed destruction to come upon the army as retribution, by ruining Herod.

Note that Josephus states that John's baptism did not pardon sins but instead for the "purification of the body". Pardon of sins came from performing righteous deeds. Earlier in this chapter, Luke describes how John demanded sharing of one's possessions with the poor. (It should be noted that John's words sound like creating equity between people while similar words by Jesus call for self-sacrifice.)

John flatly denies that he is the Messiah through an indirect answer: one who is more powerful is coming. In contrast to other gospel accounts, Luke has no description of Jesus' arrival or of John's reluctance to baptize him. It is simply stated that once Jesus has been baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him "like a dove". The words spoken in the voice from heaven are from Psalm 2: 7, which was a coronation hymn for the kings of Judah. The baptism of Jesus is, in effect, his coronation.