




THE TWELVE VOICES OF



CHRISTMAS

— WOODROW KROLL —

The Twelve Voices of Christmas
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JOHN

VOICE OF PREPARATION

LUKE 1:13-17

Like a prelude to a symphony, John's voice rose in the desert, saying, "Messiah is coming. Prepare for Him." Later, his call to repentance softened and faded into the background as the One who was born in Bethlehem as the Savior of the world began His public ministry.

As far back as I can remember, I knew I was different. As I grew up the differences between me and people around me became more pronounced.

I asked my father why. He was a very godly priest, and I thought he could help me through those difficult times. In answer, he told me the story of my birth.

My birth was a miracle, he said. He and my mother had prayed for a son for many years, but were childless. Finally they had given up hope, for they were too old to have a baby.

Then one day when my father was serving in the sanctuary of the temple, an angel appeared to him and told him that he and my mother were to have a son. I would be a very special son, the angel told him. I would be filled with the Holy Spirit from my mother's womb. That's why I was different, my father said.

That was about all I could take for one day. So he told me the rest of the story, bit by bit, as I grew older. I was to be the voice of preparation - I had been chosen by God to prepare the way for the Messiah, and I was to serve as His forerunner, in the spirit and power of the

prophet Elijah.

Malachi, one of our famous prophets, had even spoken of the messenger who would pave the way for the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah had referred to him as a voice crying in the wilderness. "That's who you are and what you are to do," my father told me.

It wasn't until I was grown and had retreated to the wilderness that I had enough solitude and time to think through everything my parents had experienced and everything the angel had told my father. I lived simply, wearing a garment made of camel's hair with a leather girdle, and eating only locusts and wild honey.

There, in my solitude, I communed with God's Spirit, until I fully understood His call and commission to me. I knew that Messiah was alive, but I did not know who He was. I understood the corruption in men's hearts and the terrible judgment awaiting them if they did not repent. And I was certain that the Holy Spirit was driving me to preach this message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So I left my solitary life and began

preaching in the area of the Jordan River. Multitudes came to listen - peasants from Jerusalem and as far away as Galilee, soldiers on their way from Damascus to Petra, even priests and scribes from Jerusalem. They came to hear me speak and to watch me baptize in the river. Some were just curious. Some laughed at the way I dressed. Some thought I was Elijah resurrected.

I was not an eloquent or polished speaker. My preaching would probably be described as fiery and bombastic, and I always spoke of the inevitable and impending judgment of God. But with my whole heart I wanted my listeners to escape that judgment, so I tirelessly pointed out the way to safety. "Repent!" I told them. "Forsake your sin. The Messiah is coming. Be ready for Him."

Isaiah had prophesied that I was to make Messiah's paths straight. What a picture! In days past, before a king went on a journey, he sometimes sent a courier ahead to tell people to prepare for his coming. They were commanded to straighten out the winding paths and smooth out the rocky ones.

I was like that courier, telling people they should be prepared to receive the Messiah. And I told them they needed to correct the moral obstacles in their lives.

My baptism appealed to many people who weren't really interested in my message of repentance. They wanted some magical rite performed on them by someone they considered a prophet. But I told them, "You can't escape punishment this way! You are hypocrites. You come to me like

a brood of vipers who scurry out of their hiding places to escape the flames when dry brushwood and stubble catch fire."

I reminded them of the judgment to come, when the truly repentant would be separated from the unrepentant, just as the good grain is separated from the chaff on the threshing floor. They would suffer punishment, just as certainly as the chaff is burned.

For the most part, people weren't prepared for my message of repentance. But then, people are rarely prepared to hear what they need to hear.

I had upset both the religious and the political establishments. I once blasted Herod the Tetrarch for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Later I was captured by him, held in a dungeon and eventually beheaded. Even if I had known that, it would have made no difference. I would not have backed down.

Not too far into my ministry it was rumored that I was the Messiah. I made it quite clear that I was not by showing them two ways in which we were different. "He is greater than I am," I said, "so great that I am not worthy enough even to untie His sandals." I also told them, "I baptize with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit." I was using a physical object - water. His work would be spiritual. He would have the power to purify hearts and give eternal life.

At that time I still did not know who the Messiah was. Then one day a relative of mine, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan and asked me to baptize Him. I knew something of the purity of His

life, so at first I refused. I told Him that I need to be baptized by Him. But Jesus said that it was fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

When He came out of the water, I saw the heavens open, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on Him. And I heard a voice from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Then I knew that Jesus was the Messiah! I reflected on the stories from my youth - of the supernatural conception of Jesus, of the promise of prophets and angels, of my miraculous conception six months before Mary conceived Jesus, and of my leap within my mother's womb in recognition that Mary carried the Anointed One of Israel.

I had not been present at the birth of Jesus; and even if I had, I would have been too young to understand what was happening. But I was a vital part of that marvelous, majestic story.

In Jehovah's eternal plan, my task was to point men to Jesus. When He began His public ministry, I realized that He must increase, and I must decrease. After all, I was a herald, and of what use is a herald after the king has arrived?

My call to repentance softened, and I faded into the background. Yet I continued to point to Jesus as the expected Messiah.