

John the avant-garde (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

John the Baptist had no chance at being ordinary—but he takes his outlier status to new heights all on his own.

by [Katie Kirk](#)

December 15, 2023

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

My first memory of a church song isn't a hymn. It's a Vacation Bible School song about John the Baptist. The only lyrics I remember are "He ate bugs for lunch! / Yuck, yuck, yuck!" The protein content of locusts aside, John is not the person you bring home for the holidays to show the neighborhood gossips that you have respectable friends.

You can't even tell your neighbor that John comes from an uncomplicated family. His father, Zechariah, was an elderly priest. After disbelieving the angel Gabriel's testimony that his wife Elizabeth would get pregnant, Zechariah lost his ability to speak for months. John's mother experienced infertility for years and then became pregnant in her old age. His cousin Mary almost got dumped when she became pregnant with the Messiah. His cousin Jesus was born in a stable.

John had no chance at being ordinary—but he takes his outlier status to new heights all on his own. He becomes so notorious for baptizing people (not to mention the locust lunches) that an entourage of religious leaders comes to Bethany from Jerusalem to figure out who he is. He doesn't even give them a straight answer, he

just strings them along in a guessing game: *Are you Elijah? Are you the Messiah?*

And John is not. John the Baptist is the forerunner, the vanguard, the avant garde of his time. In John 1, even the position of John the Baptist in the text is out of place. Our text for this week grabs a piece from the middle of the prologue, already a strange introduction to the rest of the gospel, and then from the next piece to stitch together the story of John the Baptist. He is the weird part of the weird part of the gospel. As a person, John is very out there. But John is not seeking attention not for himself but for Christ, who is to come after him.

John the Baptist reminds me that God loves an outlier. God does not reserve all narratives in the story of Jesus for those who are socially acceptable to the elite, those with perfect table manners and families who taught them to network. In Jesus' story, blessed are the wacky. John the Baptist's story teaches us to love our own avant garde and to look for what they are ushering in. I wonder what we can find to love in the ones who unsettle our norms, the ones on the edges of new ideas, the ones wandering the wilderness telling us to prepare the way of the Lord.