Cousins Before the Cross

Cousins Before the Cross — John the Baptist Skit (15 min)

WHAT

A two-act diptych. Scene one: a young pregnant Mary travels the hill country to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is six months along with a son she never expected to bear. When Mary calls out a greeting, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps. Elizabeth blesses Mary. Mary sings the Magnificat. The two women stay together for three months. Scene two jumps thirty years and lands on the bank of the Jordan. The two babies, now grown, meet as men. John recognizes his cousin Jesus before Jesus says a word. Jesus asks to be baptized. John resists. Jesus insists. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. The voice of the Father speaks. Two cousins, one moment, the whole gospel held between them.

THEME

> *Before the cross there were cousins, and before there were cousins there were two women who said yes.*

WHO

MARY — Teen. Pregnant. Travel-worn. Eyes huge. Carrying a secret she has only told God and Joseph and her cousin.

ELIZABETH — Older. Sixties. Six months pregnant after a lifetime of being barren. Joy that takes a moment to land before it pours out.

ZECHARIAH — Mute throughout the first scene. Communicates only with looks and hands. Older. Stunned every time he sees his wife's belly.

YOUNG JOHN (V.O.) — Offstage child voice for one beat — the leap in the womb is treated as an audible sound moment, optional.

ADULT JOHN — Thirty years later. Camel-hair coat. Sun-darkened. Knees deep in the Jordan. The same warmth in his eyes as the baby who leapt.

ADULT JESUS — Thirty years later. Quiet. Steady. Walks down the bank like a man on a long-planned errand.

VOICE FROM HEAVEN — Offstage. The Father. Spoken plainly, not in thunder.

HOW (STYLE / TONE)

Two halves on one stage. The first half is warm interior — a low table, a clay water jar, soft lamps, the suggestion of a courtyard door. The second half is cool exterior — blue-grey lighting, a low platform suggesting a riverbank, a shallow basin of real water if your stage allows. The transition between scenes is a slow lighting shift over a held silence; no curtain, no blackout. Multi-generational casting helps — let Mary be young, Elizabeth be older, the adult cousins be near in age. The dove can be a piece of soft white silk lowered from above on a fishing line, or a single lighting cue.

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PROPS

- A clay water jar and basin
- A low wooden table with two cups
- Two oil lamps (electric flicker is fine)
- A travel cloak and a small bundle for Mary
- A wooden bench for Elizabeth
- A writing tablet and stylus for Zechariah
- A camel-hair coat and leather belt for adult John
- A simple linen tunic for adult Jesus
- A shallow basin or low pool for the baptism beat
- A piece of white silk on a fishing line, or a dove lighting effect

TIME

15 minutes

Scene 1 — The Door of the Hill Country

(Lights up warm on the courtyard of a small house in the hill country. ELIZABETH sits on the bench, one hand on her belly. ZECHARIAH sits beside her, writing tablet on his lap. The air is still. A clay water jar sits on the low table. The afternoon sun cuts a long stripe across the floor. From offstage, footsteps — light, quick, young — moving up the path toward the door.)

NARRATOR: Luke records that in those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. The Gospel does not tell us how long the road was, or how many neighbors she passed, or whether the dust on her sandals was from her own town or this one. What it tells us is that the moment her voice reached the door, the room changed forever.

MARY (offstage, calling)

Elizabeth! Cousin Elizabeth, it is Mary! I am here! I have come!

(ELIZABETH straightens. ZECHARIAH lifts his head sharply. ELIZABETH's hand presses into her belly. Her face changes — surprise, then a deeper recognition, then a joy that does not have a name yet.)

ELIZABETH (gasping, joyful)

Oh — oh — the child — Zechariah, the child just leapt. He leapt inside me. He has never moved like that before. Zechariah, get the door, get the door, it is Mary.

YOUNG JOHN (V.O., a single soft heartbeat sound)

[a quick, glad knock from inside the womb]

(Zechariah stands, eyes wide, and grips his writing tablet with both hands. He cannot speak. He has not been able to speak in six months. He gestures urgently

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at the door with the stylus. MARY appears in the doorway, travel-worn, cloak dusty, eyes bright. She has come a long way and she has come fast.)

Scene 2 — The Greeting

ELIZABETH (loud, almost laughing)

Blessed are you among women, Mary. Blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

MARY (stepping in slowly)

Elizabeth — how do you — I have not even told you —

ELIZABETH

Behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy. He knew. Before I knew. He knew.

MARY

Then it is true.

ELIZABETH

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

(Mary sets her bundle down. She walks slowly to Elizabeth and kneels in front of her, both hands on Elizabeth's hands. Zechariah watches them, mouth open, no sound coming out. He lifts his tablet but cannot decide what to write.)

Scene 3 — The Magnificat

MARY (rising slowly, voice growing as she goes)

My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

MARY

For he who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

MARY

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones. And exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things. And the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

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(Elizabeth weeps quietly, her hand on her belly. Zechariah lowers his tablet. He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.)

Scene 4 — Three Months

ELIZABETH

Stay with me, Mary. Stay until the baby comes. The road back to Nazareth is long and you need a place where the truth is already known.

MARY

I will stay. Joseph said I could stay. He told me to drink the cool water of this house and rest.

ELIZABETH

Three months. Then you go home and your own waiting begins. Yours will be longer than mine. Yours will have whispers around it.

MARY

Three months. I will take whatever the Lord gives me, cousin. Whispers and all.

(Elizabeth reaches for Mary's hand. Mary lays her hand on Elizabeth's belly. Elizabeth lays hers on Mary's. They are quiet a long time. Outside the doorway, the sun tilts an inch in the sky.)

ELIZABETH (softly)

Two cousins, two sons. The world does not know yet what is happening in this room, Mary. The streets of this city are walking past our door at this very moment, on their way to markets and arguments and supper, and not one of them knows.

MARY

It will know. One day. They will tell stories about this room. They will tell them in languages we have never heard.

ELIZABETH

Let them tell stories about the women who said yes. Let them remember the door, and the leap, and the song.

MARY

And the silence. Tell them about Zechariah's silence too. There is a kind of silence that is the loudest thing in a room.

(Zechariah lifts his writing tablet. He writes one word and turns it to them. The audience sees nothing — only the women's faces. Both of them smile at the same moment.)

ELIZABETH

He says — Amen.

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(Zechariah closes his writing tablet. He nods to both of them. The lights begin to shift, warm fading to cool, a slow change held over a silent beat. The set itself does not move; only the light becomes river-light. The bench, the lamps, the basin — they remain, but the air around them is colder now, and the years have passed.)

Scene 5 — Thirty Years on the Jordan

NARRATOR: Thirty years pass in the silence between the lights. The babies grow. One walks into the wilderness with a leather belt around his waist and a strange diet on his tongue. The other works in a carpenter's shop until the day He sets the hammer down. The cousins meet again where the river is the loudest.

(Lights up cool on the riverbank platform. ADULT JOHN stands knee-deep in the basin of water, sleeves rolled, hair wet from a morning of baptisms. He turns slowly, scanning the shore. ADULT JESUS walks down the path from upstage, simple linen tunic, sandals dusty.)

JOHN (very quiet, recognizing)
Cousin.

JESUS
John.

(They look at each other for a long moment. Neither moves.)

Scene 6 — I Need to Be Baptized by You

JOHN
Why have you come, cousin. Why have you walked all the way down to me, of all the prophets in the country, of all the rivers in the land.

JESUS
To be baptized by you.

JOHN
No. No, cousin. I need to be baptized by You. Not the other way around. The water in this basin is for sinners. I have been pouring it on tax collectors and Pharisees and soldiers since dawn. I cannot pour it on You.

JESUS
Let it be so now, John. For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

JOHN
But I have been telling them. For three years, every morning, every evening, every man and woman who walked down this bank — I have been telling them You are coming. I have been telling them I am not worthy to untie the strap of Your sandal. And now You walk down the bank and ask me to put my hand on Your head.

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JESUS

Yes.

JOHN

Cousin. I am the wilderness. You are the road.

JESUS

And the road has come to the wilderness. Let it be so now. Please. I am not asking you because the Father needs the water. I am asking you because the people on the bank need to see it. They have to see Me step where they have stepped. They have to see the One who is to come standing where the sinners stood.

JOHN (very quietly)

And me. What about me, cousin. What does this water do for me.

JESUS

It puts your hand on the head of the King, John. And the King has waited his whole life for that moment.

(John bows his head. He breathes once, deeply, the way a man does when he gives in to something larger than him. He extends his hand to Jesus. Jesus steps into the water. The basin ripples around their ankles.)

Scene 7 — The Dove

(JESUS lowers Himself into the water. JOHN lays his hand on the back of His head, very gently, with the care of a cousin. They are still a moment. Then Jesus rises out of the water. The lights brighten on Him.)

(From above, on a fine line, a piece of white silk descends slowly toward Jesus' shoulder. Or — alternative — a single warm light falls on his head and holds there, no other movement on stage.)

VOICE FROM HEAVEN (offstage, plain, unhurried)

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

(The riverbank is silent. JOHN's hand stays on Jesus' shoulder a beat longer than the audience expects. He removes it slowly, the way a man removes a hand from holy ground.)

Scene 8 — The Cousins, Wet

(JESUS steps up out of the water. He stands beside JOHN on the bank. They are both soaking. The light is warm on them now, not cold. They stand shoulder to shoulder, looking down the river. The far bank is hazy with morning light.)

JOHN (softly)

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I felt You, cousin. The day my mother heard your mother at the door. I leapt. I was not even born and I leapt. She told me about it every winter, by the oven, when the bread was rising. She said — that was the day I knew, John. That was the day the room knew.

JESUS

I know, cousin. My mother told me too. She told me on the road to Jerusalem when I was twelve. She said — your cousin John was the first to know. He was a small fish swimming in his mother and he leapt for You.

JOHN

Will I see you again. After today.

JESUS

Yes. Not here. Not soon. But yes. There is a kingdom coming, John, and you will be there. There is a feast coming, and there is a chair at the table that has your name on it.

JOHN

I do not need a chair, cousin. I just need to know You walked the road I cleared.

JESUS

I am walking it now.

JOHN

Cousin.

JESUS

John.

(They embrace once, briefly, the way two men who have been waiting thirty years for a single moment embrace. Jesus turns and walks upstage toward the path. John stays on the bank, watching. He lifts one hand, half a wave, half a blessing.)

Final Moment — He Must Increase

(ADULT JOHN watches JESUS walk away until He is gone over the rise of the path. He turns slowly back to the river. He kneels at the edge of the water and dips one hand into it, lifting it and letting it run back through his fingers. The water catches the light and falls in a small bright rope back to the river.)

JOHN (quiet, to the water and to the audience)

He must increase. I must decrease. He is the Word and I am the voice. The voice is what you hear before the Word arrives. Once the Word arrives, the voice is no longer needed in the same way. That is the right order. That is the only order.

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(The lights warm on the kneeling figure. Far upstage, in a single pool of soft light, MARY and ELIZABETH from the first scene reappear standing together — older, younger, both — hands joined. They are the memory and the witness. They do not speak. They do not need to.)

JOHN (softly, to the women he cannot see)

Mother. Aunt Mary. Your sons did the thing. Your sons did the thing you said yes to. Thank you for saying yes.

(The lights hold a long moment on the three of them at once — the kneeling cousin at the river, the two women in the courtyard. Then dim slowly. Hold the dark.)

END

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