

# ST. JOHN THE FORERUNNER



## His Garments

- **Camel-hair tunic (brown, gray, or earth tones):**
  - Symbolizes humility, poverty, and his life in the desert.
  - Brown/earth tones = renunciation of worldly pleasures, closeness to creation, repentance.
- **Cloak (green or dark blue):**
  - Green = new life, renewal, hope, and connection to nature. John stands at the “green beginning” of the New Covenant.
  - Blue = heavenly calling, spiritual wisdom. When used, it emphasizes his role as a heavenly messenger preparing the way for Christ.

## The Angelic Wings

- Often painted in **gold or light colors**:
  - Gold = divine glory, participation in the heavenly realm.
  - The wings emphasize that John’s mission is angelic — not that he is an angel, but that he is the **messenger** (*angelos*).

## The Scroll

- Usually written on a **white or parchment-colored scroll**:
  - White = purity and truth of his message.
  - The scroll itself represents the prophetic Word of God.

## Background

- **Gold background** (common in Orthodox icons):
  - Symbolizes the **Kingdom of God**, timelessness, and eternity.
  - John’s life and martyrdom are not trapped in history but shine in the eternal presence of God.

## Colors of His Face and Body

- Painted in **ascetic tones — olive, brown, or even grayish hues**:
  - These subdued colors emphasize fasting, struggle, self-denial, and his desert life.
  - Unlike saints shown in more vibrant flesh tones, John is intentionally painted gaunt and weathered — he embodies repentance.

## Additional Colors

- **Red (sometimes in garments or details)**:
  - Red = divine energy, martyrdom, the fire of prophecy.
  - If his outer garment has red elements, it points to his martyrdom and burning zeal.
- **White (sometimes in his inner tunic)**:
  - White = purity, holiness, and divine light. It can highlight his role in baptizing Christ — the one pure who prepares for the Pure.

## Symbolic Synthesis

- **Brown/earth tones** → humility, desert, repentance.
- **Green** → new life, hope, beginning of the Kingdom.
- **Blue** → heavenly calling, prophetic wisdom.
- **Red** → martyrdom, fiery zeal.
- **Gold** → divine glory, eternal life.
- **White** → purity, truth, the prophetic Word.

✦ So, in the **St. John the Forerunner icon**, the colors preach as much as the imagery: they show him as an ascetic prophet (brown, gray), a heavenly messenger (blue, wings, gold), a preacher of repentance (green, scroll), and a martyr who offered his life to God (red, silver, head in a dish).

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## Theological Role

- John is the “**boundary figure**”:
  - The **last prophet** of the Old Covenant.
  - The **first witness** of the New Covenant.
- He bridges prophecy and fulfillment, Law and Gospel, Old Testament expectation and New Testament reality.
- This is why his icon is prominent on the **iconostasis**, usually to Christ's left: he literally “prepares the way” into the Kingdom.

## Facial Expression

- His countenance is usually serious, even mournful. He is not a figure of comfort but of **fiery repentance**.
- Yet his gaze is often directed slightly upward, showing that his life and message point entirely to **Christ, the True Light**.

## His Emaciated, Ascetic Body

- His gaunt features, hollow cheeks, and long beard reflect his **desert life of fasting** and complete dependence on God.
- He embodies the **ascetic ideal**: detachment from the world, focus on the eternal.
- His appearance proclaims that holiness comes not from earthly beauty or strength, but from **spiritual purity and self-denial**.

## His Halo (always gold):

- Gold symbolizes divine light, sanctity, and participation in the Kingdom of Heaven. As the greatest of the prophets and the Forerunner of Christ, John is clothed in this eternal light.

## His Hair and Appearance

- **Wild hair and beard (dark brown or black, sometimes with reddish highlights):**  
These show him as a prophet and desert-dweller, untamed by society, consumed only with zeal for God. In iconography, the unkempt look reinforces his role as the fiery preacher of repentance.

## Symbolic Contrast Between Christ and St. John

### Christ's Colors

In Orthodox icons, Christ is usually clothed in:

- **Inner garment: red (divine nature)**  
Red is the color of divinity, sacrifice, and life-giving blood.
- **Outer garment: blue (human nature)**  
Blue symbolizes creation and humanity.

Thus, Christ's clothing is always arranged to say:  
**God (red) clothed Himself in humanity (blue).**

### St. John the Forerunner's Colors

- **Inner garment: green or brown (earth, creation, repentance, renewal)**
- **Outer garment: camel-hair, brown, rough and ascetic (humility, earthliness, the desert life)**

This arrangement says:

**John is entirely of the earth, pointing away from himself toward the divine.**  
He embodies creation waiting for redemption — the desert blooming through repentance.

### The Symbolic Contrast

1. **Heaven vs. Earth**
  - Christ's red and blue show divinity entering humanity.
  - John's green/brown show humanity and creation reaching upward in repentance.  
→ Together, they depict the "meeting place" of heaven and earth.
2. **Fullness vs. Preparation**
  - Christ is the **fulfillment**: God who became man, the Kingdom come.
  - John is the **preparer**: man of the wilderness, pointing the way.  
His rough, earthy colors deliberately contrast Christ's radiant red and blue.
3. **The New Adam vs. The Last Prophet**
  - Christ wears colors of **life and eternity**.

- John wears colors of **mortality and renunciation**.  
He must “decrease” so that Christ may “increase” (John 3:30). The color symbolism reinforces this.
- 4. **Iconographic Dialogue**  
When placed side by side (such as in Deësis icons where John intercedes on Christ’s right hand):
  - John’s earthy greens and browns visually **draw the viewer’s eyes to Christ’s luminous red and blue**.
  - His colors “dim” beside Christ’s glory, underscoring his humility and his role as herald, not the Light himself.

### **In summary:**

- **Christ’s colors:** red + blue = God becomes man, divinity united with creation.
- **John’s colors:** green + brown = creation’s humility and repentance, preparing for union with God.
- Together, they form a visual theology: the Forerunner embodies the old covenant and humanity’s cry for renewal, while Christ embodies the divine answer — the Kingdom fully present.