

**2 Advent
December 8, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Today we hear the story of John the Baptist in the wilderness. I once served as rector of an Episcopal Church in Wake Forest, North Carolina, just outside of Raleigh. The church's patron and namesake was John the Baptist. Now the town of Wake Forest was the home of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary ... part of the Southern Baptist Convention. Wake Forest was also home to 18 Baptist churches. It was hard not to see "Baptist" everywhere in the small town. Well, every year there was a street fair on Wake Forest's one-block-long downtown, and the women from St. John's would sell baked goods to raise money for our church school program. One year I went down to the street fair to support them and the sign in front of their table read:

**St. John's
The Baptist Episcopal Church.**

I think the women selling our baked goods just wanted to feel included.

We just heard about John the Baptist from Matthew's gospel. However, the character, John the Baptist, appears in all four gospels. According to Luke's gospel John the Baptist was a PK ... a Preacher's Kid. His father was a Jewish priest who once served at the Temple in Jerusalem. I would imagine that John must have heard the story of his birth so many times it made him dizzy. According to Luke, the Angel Gabriel told his father, Zechariah, that his elderly and barren wife, Elizabeth, would have a child in her old age. This child, of course was named John ... and would later be known as John the Baptist!

From as far back as he could remember, John was told of all the wonderful things he was destined to do ... and I imagine he hated every thought of it. I am sure that John felt an intensely intimate relationship with the divine presence of God ... Yahweh. But the religious rituals and sacrifices of his father and the other priests, and the fancy robes and bells and incense in the Temple didn't make much sense to him. As soon as John was old enough he left home and headed as far away from the Temple as he could get. John ended up in the wilderness of the Jordan River Valley.

Dressed in camel's hair and fueled by locusts, the curmudgeonly prophet raised his voice and let the people have it: "You brood of vipers!" "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." He used colorful language and showed little respect for the powerful. He announced a new world order. Could it be that this man was a genuine prophet?

The image of John the Baptist that we hear in the Gospels is a stark contrast to Christmas displays of Nativity scenes and Wise Men and Santa Claus and Reindeer and Elves. The gospel reading for today interrupts the holiday cheer that reverberates through neighborhoods lit by holiday lights, and airwaves broadcasting songs of the season, Christmas house tours by garden clubs, and big box stores jammed with shoppers.

I've never seen John the Baptist featured on an Advent calendar or Christmas greeting card, but all four Gospels place him front and center in Jesus's origin story. John's gaunt austerity is the only gateway we have to the swaddling clothes, angel's wings, and fleecy lambs we hold dear each December. As baffling as it may seem, the holy drama of the season depends on the disheveled baptizer's opening act.

So, why the wilderness? Well, this wilderness was a place outside the purview of the powerful leaders, a place where humans were tested and tried. If people wanted to "repent," to turn away from old ways of life, then they must go out, get away from home and all that controls them. There they would meet the prophet, confess sins, and be baptized.

This Advent season demands the same of us. If we want to return to a state of expectancy in our faith, we must travel outside of holiday sounds, sights, and social events to the place in our lives where "wild things" live in order for something new to be born.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It is this repentance of which John proclaims that makes the difference. As many of you know, the Greek word translated here is *metanoia*, meaning "turn around." However, this isn't just about changing one's behavior; it is much, much deeper than that. It is **NOT** just about stopping doing sinful things and acting righteously, although that may happen.

It **IS** about becoming who God made you to be, and to do that one has to give up ... to turn away from ... that which keeps us from living in the image of God.

I believe that all humans are born innocent and blessed. Deep within us is the image of God wanting to become whole. Deep within our souls is the seed of divine life waiting to blossom. Our spiritual ancestors, sages and prophets all point us in the direction of wholeness ... that is the most basic essence of our holy scriptures. Yet, generations after generation we miss the mark. We seek wholeness and we come up short. We yearn to live in the image of God, and fear gets in the way.

John the Baptist, who was way outside the box of conventional wisdom, was proclaiming a "turning around" ... *metanoia* ... of one's heart and soul as a means to finding that true image of God alive within one's own life. And the story of John the Baptist is our introduction to the birth of Jesus.

Remarkably, in this text, lots of people made that journey to be baptized by John the Baptist! That tells us that folks were desperate for change. Turning back to God seemed the right thing to do, especially when the preacher was announcing that God's realm was just around the corner and, in fact, would arrive any day. The climate seemed to be charged with a renewed judgment of the way of life that held them captive.

John's message was about political and social change; he was quick to point out the wickedness of unbridled power and wealth. His message went beyond the realm of politics, however. He preached against religious abuse and hypocrisy. When Pharisees and Sadducees came out to the wilderness for baptism, John went ballistic! John got up in their faces and confronted them in front of all those crowds who had come out from Jerusalem and all Judea. If these religious leaders thought they could make a public display of their righteousness by being baptized by a prophet, they didn't really know who John the Baptist was! So John preached a sermon that got their attention and challenged them to true repentance.

"You brood of vipers!" he shouted at the Pharisees and Sadducees. This insulting image of poisonous snakes confronts the arrogance of the religious leaders. He likens them to the snakes that killed the wandering Israelites in the desert under Moses' rule. He accuses them of being the "lowest of the low," those who deceive and destroy.

"Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'" he shouted at the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their arrogance presumed that they were God's best friends and favorite sons. It was easy to forget that God had chosen Abraham and his descendants as God's own people, and God could choose Gentiles to join the family just as easily. In fact, John said that God could take a dead rock and make it a living heir of the promise, if that's what God wanted to do.

"Good fruit" seemed to be what God was looking for from the tree that took root in Judea. The message is clear in John's sermon: how we live our lives makes a difference! How life is lived in relation to others is the truest measure of a person's character and identity. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, the proof of their repentance would be demonstrated by a radical embrace of humility, generosity, and acceptance of others, especially the poor, the outcasts, and those outside the Jewish community.

This John the Baptist was in the wilderness ... not Jerusalem. He wore a rough coat of camel's hair pulled tight with a leather belt ... not the refinements of a priest. And, he ate locust and wild honey like the prophet Elijah before him. This John was obviously anti-establishment. He was outside the box. And, he was the precursor of Jesus.

Make no mistake about it, the story of John's counter-culture life as a prelude to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus is meant to tell us something. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously this is not going to be life as usual.

We are just three weeks away from celebrating the birth of Jesus. The Feast of the Incarnation is one of the two holiest days in our faith. Yet Christmas has become an institution in its own right both within the Church and within our social environment. It is as if the symbol has lost its power. If all we do is celebrate Christmas as an end in itself, then we clearly miss the point. However, if we understand it as the birth of something radically different in the life of the world, and in our own lives, we can grasp this holiday as truly a holy and sacred day and encounter God in the midst of it.

Yes, John was the precursor of Jesus. He was there to “prepare the way of the Lord.” At Christmas we will have a choice: we can remember an event that took place 2,000 years ago ... an event of the past ... or we can choose to celebrate the birth of Jesus as an event that can happen in our own lives ... the divine presence of God coming alive in us today.

Knowing the story of John the Baptist can teach us something about how we might prepare, and where we have to go to get ready. John could have remained within the security of his family’s identity of ancestral priesthood. John could have lived in the safety of his hometown. But he embraced the unconventional which took him into the wilderness. He countered the rituals of the religious institution with a baptism in a river. He supplanted the sacrifice of the Temple with the act of repentance ... of *metanoia* ... of turning from an old life to a new life aimed at living in God’s image. And people flocked to John the Baptist, including Jesus.

As we prepare for this Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, the divine presence of God coming alive in each of us, let us listen to John. It may mean going into the wilderness, because you won’t find him in the temples of our world. For us this may be a metaphorical wilderness ... the psychological and spiritual places that are outside our comfort zones ... those places far from the safety of our temples of wealth, and power, and prestige, and pride. It may mean listening to an unconventional wisdom, because the conventional wisdom will continue to point you on the same path you have always been on. And it will mean repentance ... *metanoia* ... turning around. It will mean letting go of fears that keep you from allowing the image of God to blossom within you. It will mean looking at our lives in a new way. The image of God is within us waiting to come alive.

Let us be prepared for the Feast of the Incarnation, not just as a remembrance of an event of the past, but as a reality of the divine image of God coming alive in our world ... in each one of us ... today.

Amen.