

Preparing the Way of the Lord

At first blush, Advent and John the Baptist may not seem like an obvious pairing. When I think about Christmas and getting ready for Jesus, my mind doesn't immediately leap to an oddly-dressed man hurling insults at his audience somewhere in the Judean desert. And yet, all four of the Gospels feature John the Baptist as the prophet who proclaims the coming of Christ. John is Jesus's forerunner, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Many theologians see John as the best example of how to prepare for Jesus's coming. Jesus himself says that "among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist..." So, even if John seems eccentric and maybe even a little bit scary, it behooves me as a Christian to respect the man for whom Jesus had such high praise.

We don't know a lot about John, but we can be pretty confident that he existed. The first-century Jewish priest, scholar and historian Flavius Josephus wrote at some length about John, praising him as a good man who "had asked the Jews to lead a virtuous life and to come together for baptism, while practising righteousness towards each other, and piety towards God." Josephus wrote that Herod executed John to keep the prophet from leading a rebellion against him. Apparently Herod, like many others, wondered whether the outspoken John might just be the conquering warrior for whom Israel had waited for so many generations.

John was the last in a long line of Hebrew prophets, a man handpicked by God to bring divine messages to his chosen people, and the only one of the prophets to see Jesus in the flesh. He must have been a compelling presence. While archeologists disagree on exactly where in the wilderness John preached and baptized, the locations they propose are all five miles or more from Jerusalem. That's roughly a two-hour hike through rugged terrain for anyone who came to hear him. And John wasn't exactly gentle with those who sought him out. According to

Matthew, John called the many Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him to be baptized a “brood of vipers.” We hear more about the Pharisees than the Sadducees in the Gospels, but both were groups of proud, powerful religious leaders who disagreed on some aspects of doctrine but who ultimately united to silence Jesus. One wouldn’t expect them to take insults lightly. And yet, they came to John even though he berated them, insulted them and threatened them with unquenchable fire. Why on earth would they do such a thing?

A few might have come for the spectacle, but I don’t think most people went to John to be entertained. John gave his followers what was, at that time, a unique form of spiritual purification. Under the Hebrew purity laws, observant Jews bathed regularly to wash away their sins and failings. However, John’s baptism was different and radically new. His baptism was for repentance, not purification and, like our baptism today, was a singular event. Once baptized into repentance by John, a faithful soul would remain baptized for all time.

So when John told his listeners to repent, what exactly did he mean? We moderns tend to think repentance involves a whole lot of guilty, tearful breast-beating. But John wasn’t looking for empty theatrics. When John called upon his followers to repent, he used the word μετανοέω (“metanoēō”), the verb form of metanoia. Metanoia implies turning away, in this case from sin and toward God, but it’s mostly about changing one’s mind and heart to detest one’s past sins. So when John told his audience to repent because the kingdom of heaven had come near, he was asking them to change their minds and hearts, to turn away from the thoughts and habits that separated them from God so they could admit their need for forgiveness.

We moderns need metanoia just as much as John’s Pharisees and Sadducees did. As Pope Francis observes in his pastoral book on Matthew’s Gospel, we can’t just say “we’re Christians, so we don’t need to repent” any more than the Pharisees and Sadducees could justify themselves

by claiming Abraham as their ancestor. As Christians, we are called to model ourselves on Jesus as best we can, knowing that we'll never achieve his levels of compassion and virtue. We have to try, and we'll never succeed. That's why we need to repent – so we can turn away from our human failings and turn to God, seeking to change our minds and hearts to more perfectly align with his will.

As I mentioned earlier, many theologians praise John as the perfect example of what to do in Advent while we're waiting for Jesus. John got a lot of things right. He refused to be tempted by suggestions that he might be the chosen one, always insisting that he was simply the messenger and not worthy so much as to carry the sandals of the Messiah who was to come. He preached the kingdom of heaven passionately and without apology, something we moderns are often embarrassed to do. And John allowed himself to be diminished as Jesus's ministry grew, spending his last days languishing in prison before being executed by the cruel, egotistical king.

But, as Pope Francis acknowledges, John got one thing entirely wrong. He failed to foresee Jesus's gentle, forgiving nature. Instead, John warned the powerful Pharisees and Sadducees that the Messiah would inflict eternal, fiery torment on those who failed to repent and bear good fruit. We can't blame John for this mistake. He would have been influenced by predictions in the Hebrew Scriptures, a few of which appear in this morning's readings. Isaiah, who predicted John's coming as the "voice crying out in the wilderness," foretold that the Messiah would "strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips ... kill the wicked." Psalm 72 promised that the Messiah would "crush the oppressor." These predictions reflect our human hope that those who do us wrong will finally get what's coming to them when the Judgment Day arrives. But I think John was mistaken in saying that, unless they repented, his listeners would burn in unquenchable fire. I don't always agree with Billy Graham,

but I believe he was right to say that Hell wasn't created for people. Jesus died to keep us out of Hell, and tradition tells us that he spent the three days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection harrowing Hell, rescuing doomed souls from the Adversary's clutches. We, the wayward children of God, were created to live in the kingdom of heaven. We were never meant to suffer in Hell.

But while I don't believe Jesus wants to condemn any of us, Scripture compels me to admit that Jesus will judge us when he returns. We affirm that every Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed. As a very fallible person, I know what Jesus will see when he judges me. I can't imagine anything more mortifying than seeing disapproval and pity on his face when he does. If Jesus were to condemn me, he wouldn't need to send me to Hell. I'd go of my own free will to escape the disappointment in his eyes.

That's why we need metanoia. It's not to let us avoid punishment, but to help us turn away again and again from all our temptations and shortcomings. That way, when we finally do stand before Jesus, we'll know that, however many times we fell short, we did our best to keep getting back up and following him. And when we know that, Jesus's grace and forgiveness can reach into our changed hearts and heal us all.

So in this Advent season, take time now and then to contemplate the beliefs and behaviors that may prevent you from standing comfortably in Jesus's presence. Then, ask him to help you change your mind and heart so you can greet him with joy and quiet confidence when he returns. As Isaiah and John would say, prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight. Repent and rejoice, because the kingdom of heaven is coming near. *Amen.*