

Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2007
St. John the Baptist
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Preaching can be dull. When preaching is dull, it is usually the preacher more than the topic. Preaching should be exciting and engaging. John the Baptist is a good example of how engaging preaching can be.

John burst into history as God's unconventional servant. He was wild, rugged, fearless and austere. John survived in the wilderness on locusts and honey. He preached a message of repentance for God's kingdom is at hand. John was the forerunner of the Messiah cutting through all the tradition and formalism of his day. Like a bulldozer he flattened the mountains of people's faith and made a straight path for the Son of God to walk.

After 400 years of perceived silence, God was speaking to the people through John. Many rejoiced that John's appearance was the dawn of a new day. If John could be in the church named for him on this day, perhaps this is how he would tell his story.

Enter John the Baptist

Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand. Pay attention to how you are living your life. Is it a life dedicated to God, a life that prepares the way for God's kingdom to be realized? The Messiah is at hand. Repent and return to the Lord your God.

Your Scripture tell you there was a man sent from God whose name was John. I am that man.

There are good people even in the worst of times. I was born to two such people, Zechariah a priest and his faithful wife Elizabeth. At an early age they shared the remarkable circumstances of my birth with me. How an angel spoke to my father and said "I was to make a people ready to receive their God."

I never saw a vision or heard a direct prophecy. Who I was and what I was to do came from others. My father told me I was to prepare the way for the

Messiah's coming. I respected what he and others said. I loved God even at an early age. Can you imagine what I felt when I heard what was said about me. When you read your Bible stories can you feel the burden placed on my shoulders? Who am I to prepare the way for the Messiah? How am I supposed to do this? No one, not even my father could answer my questions.

My father brought me up in the best tradition of Jewish piety. I learned the Scriptures and the rituals of our faith. Religious training was not as haphazard as it is in your day. It is a shame, your young men are taught more about sports than what the Scriptures tell us about God. As parents you are willing to spend time and money teaching your children games rather than how Jesus taught us to live.

When I was a boy my father took me to the Temple with him when it was his duty to serve his course in the Temple. I watched as he sacrificed animals and performed the rituals. I could not help but wonder, is this really what God demands. I heard the cries of the animals and saw all the blood. Why would the Creator want the creation to be slain and carved up? I also wondered why my father was such a big man with strong hands. I soon realized they were the hands of a butcher. I recalled the words of the prophet that God desired steadfast love and not sacrifice, knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

I rebelled against the Temple. My father tried to help me understand but it made no sense. More and more I retreated to the wilderness to set my mind free. Finally one day I decided never to return home. I fell in love with the quiet as I sorted out my mission. What was it God wanted me to do?

My people were exclusive, they hated those different than they were. The Samaritans hated the Pharisees, the Pharisees hated the Galileans, and we all hated the Romans. Priests were even fighting among themselves about who had the right answers to difficult questions. I was to prepare the way in this sinful mess.

There were a few people among us who fled to the wilderness to establish a community - you know them from the Dead Sea Scrolls. I knew them from my wanderings. You cannot serve God and abandon the world. You have people who do the same thing in your day. They think the church should stick to the old way and never explore the new. They try to ignore racism,

poverty and wars as concerns that do not affect the church. Perhaps it is time for God to come again and shake people up.

The longer I stayed in the wilderness the more my mission weighed on me. Then I recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." That was it. That was my calling. It is mysterious how God works at times. I was to call God's people to repentance to prepare the way for the Messiah. The method I used was preaching and baptism as a symbol of being made clean.

So, about the year 27, I began in the lower Jordan Valley preaching and baptizing. The people thought I was a prophet. They were hungry for a word from God and came in droves to hear me. As a sign of repentance I baptized them right there in the Jordan River.

Some thought I was the Messiah. I told them one was coming after me the throng of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

One day priests from the Temple came to see what I was doing. I saw them coming. I questioned them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Go do something to prove your hearts. I suppose you think, 'we are Abraham's children so we are special'. God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones."

I say the same to you today. Do you think you are special because you come to church? It is how you live every day of your life that counts. How do you show your faith?

I suppose you can tell I speak the truth and sometimes the truth hurts. Telling the truth earned me enemies. I preached that Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, was living in sin. He put aside his wife to marry his brother's wife instead. Herodius, the wife, seethed with anger. She could not live at ease as long as I was around. She asked Herod to have me put to death but I was too popular with the crowds.

One day I looked up and there he was. I said to him, "I needed to be baptized by you and you have come to me?" Perhaps you have wondered about this encounter as you read your Bible. You do read your Bible? I was seized by my own need as I faced Jesus, just like the people who responded

to me. I baptized with water but he would baptize with fire and the Spirit. There he was. "It is right to do all the law commands," he said. So, I baptized Jesus. As he came out of the water I heard a voice, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

I thought about that later. I called people to repentance; Jesus came to be one with the people. He stood right there where so many had stood and was baptized like everyone else. He identified with our need to be loved by God, forgiven and made whole.

I did not see Jesus again for two months. Like me, he went off into the wilderness to determine his own mission.

When I saw him again I said to two of my followers, Peter and John, "Behold the Lamb of God." They followed him for he must increase and I must decrease.

I decided to go settle down. My disciples questioned my decision. I told them I was not sent to rival Jesus but to prepare his way.

Perhaps you know, Herod was tricked into doing Herodius' wishes. I was arrested, thrown into a prison and finally beheaded.

The Messiah must increase and I must decrease. Jesus said of me, "There is no greater man born of a woman than John." That is an extreme compliment.

If I could stand before you today and tell you the Kingdom of God is accomplished, all wars have ceased, all hatred and racism eliminated, all sickness healed, I would consider that a great privilege. Christ has promised that day is coming. In the meantime, he is among you and you have a foretaste of kingdom living.

How are you living into your faith? How are you using the precious gift of life? Most of you are living selfishly without regard for others. Most of you spend little time on your faith and more time feeding your own egotism. That is not the way of the Lord. You have to be the one to decide to follow Jesus or not. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Christ has come. You know the way. Repent and get on with building God's kingdom. He came once, just as surely Christ will come again.