

2nd Sunday of Advent

With the 2nd Sunday of Advent, the Gospel shifts to the person of John the Baptist. In our reading today, we find John the Baptist in the desert, preaching repentance, baptizing Jews who are coming to him from Jerusalem. Chronologically speaking, the events of our Gospel reading today come long after the birth of Christ. So why does John the Baptist suddenly take center stage in these weeks leading up to Christmas? He emerges at this point in Advent because, now as then, his role is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Of course, Jesus was already alive when John was preaching out in the desert, but He had not as yet begun his public ministry and was still unknown to the world. John in the meantime was preparing the world for the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Matthew the evangelist gives us some details that might seem to be merely intended to help us form an image in our minds of John the Baptist: he wore a garment made of camel's hair and a leather belt, for example. Certainly, it helps us to visualize him as an ascetic, i.e. one who was not living a life of comfort but rather one of penance and sacrifice. But even more than that, these details are intended to identify John with Elijah the prophet, who was described back in the book of Kings in the exact same way. The Jews believed that Elijah was going to come again and would precede the coming of the Messiah. John, then, is the new Elijah who has come to announce the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

So John was out by the Jordan River in the Judean desert, perhaps about 20 miles from Jerusalem. Traveling from Jerusalem out to the Jordan River where John was would have been a fairly difficult journey through a dry and barren landscape. Jerusalem is

a few thousand feet above sea level and gets a fair amount of rain, but just east of it, the elevation drops and the climate changes dramatically. On the highway from Jerusalem to Jericho, which is near the Jordan, there are signs which indicate the elevation, and eventually you'll see a sign that says you're at sea level, and then 100 meters below sea level, all the way down to more than 400 meters or about 1300 feet below sea level. And as you travel east of Jerusalem you leave all vegetation behind: the only vegetation to be found is along the banks of the Jordan.

Both the desert and the Jordan River hold great symbolism for the Jewish people. Centuries earlier, Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt where they wandered through the desert for 40 years, until Joshua led them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The desert had taken on the symbolic role of being a place of testing and of trial, in preparation for entry into the Promised Land, the land that the Lord had given to his chosen

people, the Israelites. The desert was also the place where the Lord had entered into a covenant with the Israelites. The fact that John the Baptist had gone out into the desert to preach by the Jordan River was symbolic of the coming of a new covenant that the Lord would establish.

The baptism that John performed in the Jordan over the people who came to him was similar to Jewish rituals of ceremonial purification but was distinct from them in that it was intended to be a single, decisive act of repentance, not one to be repeated. Repentance was at the heart of John's message. He prepared people for the coming of the Messiah by calling them to repent. I have no doubt that, were John alive today, he would not be a very popular figure. There would be many who would find him offensive, who would say he was being hostile and unwelcoming. The media would certainly have a field day, misrepresenting his words, leaving out key information, desperate to find incriminating

social media posts from years before (although they wouldn't succeed because he would have had nothing to do with that). But back then, many people nevertheless were still attracted to John's message of repentance, as difficult as it no doubt was to hear. He didn't soften his message to make it more palatable. He called people to repentance, a word which in Greek meant to change one's mind or perspective; in Hebrew, meaning to turn back, to return.

What was John calling people to turn back from? He was calling people to a "decisive, fundamental change in the direction of one's life." (From *The Gospel of Matthew* commentary by Curtis Mitch & Edward Sri). He challenged people to re-examine their lives, to treat others with justice, and to follow the Lord's commandments. And of course, we know that John lost his life because of his preaching about sexual morality: he told Herod that it was unlawful for him to have married his brother's wife, and he

lost his head for it. John the Baptist was not afraid to challenge people, to say unpopular things, for the sake of something more important: their repentance. He was not afraid to challenge people to turn away from their worldly lives and to turn back to the Lord. This is how he called people to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

And so, as we begin the 2nd week of Advent, we are preparing for the coming celebration of Christmas. The world of course has lots of expectations for this preparation: decorating, parties, buying gifts for others, all in the midst of all the other responsibilities of our regular lives. But there is another more important kind of preparation we ought not to neglect, and that involves nothing else than what John the Baptist never ceased to preach: repentance. That's because Advent should include spiritual preparation above all else. Because even though Jesus Christ has already been born into this world, we believe that he will come again, and that we must be prepared when he comes to us.

That preparation begins with repentance: turning away from the sins and the bad habits that keep us away from God. For this it is necessary to examine our consciences, to examine our lives: how do I treat others? How do I use the gifts God has given me? How do I use the time God has given me? Do I share the gifts I have been given with others? Do I give the Lord time each day in prayer? Do I grudgingly give the Lord 5 or 10 minutes, while blowing an hour or two (or more) each day staring at a screen for entertainment? Do I put my trust in the Lord, to the extent that I will give the Lord time each day in prayer, regardless of how much else I have going on in my day? Do I put my trust in the Lord, to the extent that I will give a portion of what I earn to the Church or to charity regardless of how financially secure or not I feel? I think you get the idea: repentance means taking a good look at ourselves and our lives. This is not for the purpose of feeling bad about ourselves, but for the purpose of making real change in our lives

and letting the Lord in so that He can change us. And repentance is not for its own sake – it leads to conversion. And the purpose of conversion is to live our lives more justly, so that ultimately we might one day enter the new Promised Land of heaven.

John the Baptist's message of repentance then is also one of hope. And our first reading from Isaiah is filled with hope. It gives us a promise from the Lord: that He will raise up one who will restore and renew our world, who will create the world anew so that it will be made perfect in Him. Let us keep our minds and our hearts focused on this promise, seeking repentance and conversion of heart, as we await the coming of Jesus Christ.

- **December 7, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**