

December 4, 2016
2nd Sunday of Advent
Matthew 3:1-12



Yardenit, Israel, Jordan River Baptismal Site
(Photo: Bro. Alan, 2012)

In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea 2 (and) saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" 3 It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" 4 John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him 6 and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

7 When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Background

Last week it was mentioned that, with the first Sunday of Advent, a new church year began; throughout the year the gospel texts will be drawn mostly from Matthew's gospel. Matthew's description of the relationship between Jesus and John is much different than Luke's. While the diversity may bring with it some struggle, it may also help us to realize that our God and the ways of God are always beyond our limited ability to fully grasp the fullness of God.

Luke, from the beginning of his Gospel, informs his readers that Jesus and John are relatives. Luke makes use of this relationship to compare and contrast the two men, while always emphasizing how Jesus is more significant. In today's gospel, there is no mention of the fact that John and Jesus are cousins. The same is true for Matthew's entire gospel. Instead, Matthew focuses on John as a prophet-person of the day who speaks the word of God in preparing God's people for things to come.

The way Matthew has described John's food and dress reminds people of the great reformers like Samson, Samuel, and Elijah who called from renewal within their own society. All of them called the people to be a force of resistance to injustices of their day. In that great tradition, John preaches repentance that includes a change in the way people live their lives. In order to emphasize the connection between repentance and changing one's life, John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers," understood as offspring of snakes, for their "show" of repentance without the "good fruit as evidence of your repentance." John is confronting the most powerful religious leaders of his day in his effort to proclaim boldly God's truth in a world that longs for a sense of God's presence and care.

At that time there was great unrest with authority, both civil and religious. Rome and the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem exploited common people by not confronting the systems that kept most people in need, even for the basic necessities for life. Ancestral property was confiscated, and taxes were unaffordably high. The social climate was one of unrest and desire for change. Many gave in to grumbling and complaining. Others looked for the Messiah, someone from the outside, to bring about the changes for which they longed. Instead of giving in to grumbling and complaining, John preached repentance in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. He asked the different segments of the society of his day to look at their own lives, and make the changes that were needed so as to be more in line with the values of God's reign. He must have been convinced that what he was saying was God's truth, because he had the personal integrity to confront even the most powerful of his day, the religious and civil authorities of Jerusalem.

It is possible to downplay the differences in the gospels, approaching Advent with the general theme, preparing for the birth of Christ. However, reflection on today's gospel may elicit a more sobering examination of one's willingness to be an authentic sign of values of the reign of God, and even a prophetic voice in our society that, like John, calls others to examine their own life.

Reflection Questions

1. How is the world in which John the Baptist lived similar to and different from the world in which you are living now?
2. Who are the people who would be delighted to hear someone like John speak a similar message today? Who would be the people who would be displeased with that same message?
3. Are there places within yourself that welcome the message of John? Are there also places within yourself that are repulsed by his message?
4. The verses addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees indicate that those who came to John came in repentance, and that he expected that their baptism indicated a willingness to make real changes in the way they lived their lives. When was the last time you had that kind of change in your own life?
5. By coming out to be baptized, people were publicly admitting their faults. Do you experience people more and more willing or less and less willing to admit their faults?
6. Where do you find examples of people who are willing to bring to light and tell others of the broken and sinful side of themselves? What is the fruit of that kind of honesty?
7. What do you think the Church is inviting you to reflect on, offering this gospel for reflection?
8. In Matthew's portrayal of John, what do you find attractive and/or repulsive about him?
9. What do you think was motivating people to flock to hear John preach and to be baptized by him? Have you ever asked God to bless you with a similar grace?
10. As you listen to this gospel, what is your desire?

The reflection and questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

