

“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Matthew 3:1-2 NIV

If you attend a church that uses a series of readings from the Bible called a lectionary, you have or will have in this Advent season a gospel lesson about John the Baptist. In contrast to all “warm and fuzzy” feelings about this time of year, John seems to come off like having a pail of cold water thrown on you during a snowstorm. His appearance sounds anything but stately (camel hair garment with a belt), and his diet from our perspective seems rather un- appetizing, unless that is if you like eating bugs and honey.

The location for his ministry is not very scenic or inspiring. He out in the wilderness by the Jordan River. This is hardly a place known for being a public forum. In fact Jesus says it best later on about John when he asks people why they went out there (Matthew 11: 7-9).

Then there is John’s message. It is not one that produces “warm fuzzy feeling” as well. Repent, Confess, submit yourself to a “washing”, a baptism to “get cleaned up “for the one who is to come. When the religious leaders come to ‘check John out” they get the greeting that they are children of snakes. This is obviously not the “power of positive thinking”.

Yet the Bible tells us that throngs of people went out to the desert to hear John. In fact even though the ruler Herod eventually executed him, the Bible tells us while John was imprisoned by him, he would have John come to him, and listen (obviously it never ‘sank in” with Herod) to John! Luke’s gospel even calls John’s message “good news”

After reading this description of John and John’s ministry you might be tempted to think that Luke’s using the words “good news” sounds a little off the mark!

But behind John’s appearance, and message was the powerful reason behind it, God was going to visit God’s people in a mighty way. The people of John’s time at least had the knowledge God’s awesome and holy presence meant their response was not to be casual. If they knew even some of their Old Testament stories well, it was an awesome, fearful, as well as a wonderful thing to be in the presence of God!

So John’s word to “repent”, which literally means “turn around and go in a different direction” was well received by those who were wanting the real presence of God in their lives and not just the legalism and ritualism that their religion at the time seemed to be offering as the way of relating to God.

How about us today, as we reflect and prepare for the birth of Jesus? Too often we embrace what this season means, and it does brighten our lives, and give us hope in the midst of the world around us, and even in the barrenness of the winter season. However so many times the effect is temporary and we’re off again back to our old selves and routines.

If we take John’s message to heart, it really is admitting that we are “those who miss the mark” or “sinners” as the old term has it. We then can embrace Jesus as the savior of our lives and He truly comes to us 365 days during the year to be new life, healing and forgiveness.

So let us welcome the texts about John the Baptist this Advent season for he leads us not just to “Jesus, the babe in Bethlehem”, but “Jesus, Savior of the world”.

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