

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”*

*<sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

*<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV*

Each year at this time in the season of Advent we revisit the ministry of John the Baptist for one or two weeks, depending on the cycle of readings from Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. When we read about John, it is a stark contrast to the expectations everyone has for this time of year being joyous and happy, anticipating Christmas.

We read that his ministry was not in the cities, but in the “wilderness”. This signified an area that was not populated, a stark foreboding landscape, with the risk of dangerous wild animals in the vicinity. Secondly John doesn't sound too impressive in his image. Both his clothing and his diet suggest a very stark figure. Thirdly, John’s message when falling upon 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners sounds very stern and gloomy.

So what made him such a popular preacher during his time? What attracted throngs of people out into that wilderness area by the Jordan River? To answer those questions one has to look at the religious scene during John’s ministry.

The religious leaders of the people reduced personal “spirituality” to keeping the minutest rituals to ensure they had kept the law. All of this involved many ritual washings, sacrifices as well as prayers. Accordingly, they were fairly well off financially in comparison with the vast majority of people, so they had the time as well as money to do these things. So what they were offering in terms of a “spiritual life” consisted of legalism, and empty ritual. The vast

majority of people had neither time nor money, so they felt “shut out” More than likely they wondered “where is God for us?”

So the vast majority of people were hungry for a faith and belief in God that would enter into their lives. John’s cry resonated with them. God was going to visit God’s people in a powerful way and they were to get ready for it. The Gospels tell us that a huge number of people from the surrounding region were baptized by John in order to get ready for the one who is coming. Even the religious leaders come out to the wilderness to be “baptized by John” (Except the religious authorities, who came out not because they too wanted to prepare, but to show the people they “identified” with them.)

It is interesting to note that in the end, John’s “strict” message really had results, so that when Jesus came, some his most devoted followers came from John’s. . Even later on in the Book of Acts, we find a remnant of John’s followers who had not heard about Jesus, and once they hear about Jesus they too immediately become followers.

Today we know that a vast number of people characterize themselves as “spiritual, not religious” To get to the point where faith is real and vital, we need to heed John’s message. Sometimes “spiritual tough love” may be what we need to get on track again. It is never easy to hear to as well as to do. Perhaps Martin Luther said it best, *“A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”*

What may God be calling you to do to have the vital “spiritual walk “with God you deeply want? Are you willing to do it?

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