

Out of Your Comfort Zone

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel we are subjected once again to the withering gaze and fiery preaching of St. John the Baptizer – the man chosen by God to prepare the way for the coming of his Son. And I think it's safe to say that John's very harsh and unsettling method of preparing people to receive the Savior whose birth we will soon celebrate stands in stark contrast to the way we usually think about preparing ourselves to receive the Christ Child at Christmas. I mean wherever we go these days we see greenery, decorations, and lights; there're cookies and gingerbread houses and other seasonal treats; festive music fills the air. It's jolly ol' St. Nick, mistletoe, candy canes, and ho-ho-ho. But that's sure not what we get from John. No, with him it's the sun-scorched desert; a meager diet of bugs and foul tasting wild honey; rough, scratchy clothes that make your flesh crawl; and words so caustic they blister your skin: "You brood of vipers!" Who is this guy, John? And why is he such a grouch? Why is he trying so hard to be for us less the deliverer of the glad tidings that a Savior is coming and more like the Grinch who stole Christmas? These are questions for us to grapple with this morning.

John was from a Levite family. His father, Zechariah, served as a priest of the Lord. And you may remember that both Zechariah and Elizabeth, John's mother, were quite old by the time John came around. To be sure, they had long since given up any hope of having a child when Elizabeth conceived this the forerunner of our Lord – making his conception and birth nearly as miraculous as that of Jesus; but then that's the point: this was God's doing. The Lord was making these things happen. Everything was unfolding according to his divine plan.

Upon his birth, John became the pride and joy of his parents – and the continuing hope and comfort of their old age. They knew their son was destined for great things. And as the only son of a priest, it's certain that John would have studied and prepared for the priesthood himself. I expect that Zechariah didn't give him much choice about it, and that he started John's training when he was still in the crib. But when the time came for John to begin his public service, he took an unexpected turn. He didn't pursue the same relatively cushy life of ministry that his father had, that of alternately serving the Lord in his Temple in Jerusalem when his division was on duty and spending the majority of the year teaching in a synagogue in his hometown in the Judean highlands. No, John deliberately chose a much more difficult path.

Why? I expect it was because he knew that it was his job to prepare the way for the Lord – that God had tasked him to get the people ready for Christ's appearing; but when John looked around at the happenings at the Temple, and when he listened to what was being taught by the religious leaders, and when he heard the constant bickering and politicking between the theologically liberal Sadducees and their archrivals the very legalistic Pharisees, and when he measured the overall spiritual preparedness of the nation he realized that they were anything but ready – and that the religious institutions of the day were part of the problem.

He sensed that a deep-seated spiritual stagnation had set in. Oh sure, the worship of the Lord was still going on. They prayed the prayers, they chanted the psalms, they observed all the festivals, and they offered the sacrifices; but they had lost the significance of these things. I mean, when they offered their sacrifices, they had lost the sense that these were *sin* offerings – that God's Law demands *death* for sin, but that the Lord in his mercy allowed animals to be substituted – *that these animals died for us because of our sins*. Instead, they merely thought of

them as meeting their religious obligations. God wants dead animals, so we kill animals for him. Then he's happy. So, most of the people were just going through the motions. They participated in these things with a sort of mindless ritualism. Their religious traditions had become for them a comfortable habit that really didn't engage their hearts. It didn't challenge or change them. It didn't confront them with their sins and their need to repent. Why? Because by nature people prefer it that way. They look for equilibrium. They want peace and order in their lives; no rocking the boat. They nurture the notion that I'm good with the Lord, and as long as I fulfill my religious obligations, he's good with me. And so they settle into spiritual routines that gradually become more meaningless and shallow until eventually whatever substance there is dries up altogether.

This was what was happening to God's people. Even the promise that the Lord would one day send a Savior into the world to redeem them failed to inspire them. It was more like, "Oh, yeah, sure; won't that be nice when it happens" without any sense that it ever really would. John's own father displayed this the day the angel told him that the time had come. There he was, praying in the Temple, saying the prescribed prayers that had been offered for countless centuries that entreated the Lord to send the Messiah into the world, when suddenly the angel appeared. He told Zechariah that the Lord was now answering this precise prayer – and the priest didn't believe it. He demanded a sign that it was true. Think about that: there's an angel standing next to him and he needs a sign from the Lord. Hey: how about the fact that there's an angel talking to you? You don't see that every day. But no, so entrenched was he in the notion that the hope of the nation was never really going to be fulfilled and that nothing would ever change – he simply couldn't believe it. So the angel gave him a sign. He said, since you don't believe the words you're standing here praying, you won't be able to speak until the Lord fulfills his word."

Well, that changed John's father; but it didn't have much impact on anyone beyond the immediate family. And so while John would have grown up with the sense that the Lord was now moving to fulfill his promises, it hadn't been impressed on the nation at large. For them it was all still business as usual, going through the grind, maintaining the status quo, plodding along comfortably in a hope that very few really believed in any more.

John knew he had to shake things up. He had to do something radically different. He needed to wake people up and snap them out of their spiritual lethargy. More specifically, he needed to get them out of their comfort zone. He needed them to see that they were missing the big picture – that they didn't understand what their faith was all about. He needed them to see a God full of wrath because of their sin and unbelief, a righteous Judge who was coming to destroy the wicked, which included them unless they repented and turned from their evil ways. He wanted them to see that they weren't keeping God's commands, and that their smug sense of security because they thought they were fulfilling their religious obligations was built on a lie – that while they imagined that they were safe, they were in fact this close to being cast into eternal hellfire. Only then could they see and appreciate what the Lord was now doing: sending them a Savior – a Savior from their sins.

And that's why John chose the venue he did for his ministry. He wanted the people to come away from the luxuries of civilization and the pleasant, breezy climate of the Judean hills on which Jerusalem sat. He wanted them to leave behind the comfortable, well worn, but misunderstood and unappreciated patterns of their religious rituals. He wanted them to come down, down some twelve hundred feet below sea level, to the parched desert floor and the brackish water of the lower Jordan. He wanted them to feel the searing sun and the sandy grit in their clothes. He wanted their feet to be sore from the long walk to get there. He wanted

them sweaty and stinky – the feeling of being dirty and needing a bath. He wanted them to experience a bit of hunger and thirst. And no, it's not that John enjoyed seeing people suffer; but rather that he wanted their physical discomfort to be for them an illustration – or a taste, as it were – of what their spiritual condition should be. John himself, his appearance and his way of life, was a living picture of an afflicted soul – one tortured with the thought of having offended the Lord and fearing his justly deserved punishment; one hungering and thirsting for relief, for a cleansing from sin, for a word of forgiveness, for the righteousness of God.

And what's most amazing to me is that people came. From Jerusalem, from all over Judea, from the lands around the Jordan and from Galilee, they came to John. They allowed themselves to be made uncomfortable, externally because of the trip and unpleasant conditions; but far more importantly internally by John's offensive, in your face, "You're a damned sinner" message. Why did they come? Well, obviously it was the work of God's Holy Spirit, that's the only explanation; but the Spirit works through means. And in this case the Spirit used the voice of conscience. It's that still small voice within the heart that says, "All is not well with your soul." People who practice mindless ritualism, who go through the motions of worship without making any real connection, without really being affected by it – they know deep down inside that there's something missing. There's a longing there to be filled with substance, with truth, with something that satisfies. And John provided it. He spoke the unvarnished truth: the painful truth that's so hard to hear about sin and God's wrath and the need for repentance. He broke people down and left them despairing of themselves – in utter fear of God's judgment. He did this not to be mean; but to give them hope. He pointed them to the coming Savior. He renewed their faith in him. And so, confessing their sins, they were baptized by John and given a new beginning.

And today, 2000 years later, John calls to us. He calls upon you and me to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And, I don't know, maybe that offends you. Maybe you're thinking, "I *am* ready – at least, I'm better prepared than most people. I mean, I'm here this morning in church where I'm supposed to be. I'm singing the hymns and worshipping along with the congregation. In a little bit I'll be confessing the Creed and taking Holy Communion. Hey, I even have most of my Christmas shopping done. I have the bases pretty well covered, don't I?" If that's what you think – or something very much like it – then I can guarantee that you don't have the bases covered, and that you are not ready for the coming of the Lord.

Take note that John directs his harshest words to the people who were the most religious. Why? Because they were the most comfortable with themselves and their spiritual condition. They didn't fear the wrath of God to come because they imagined that all was well with their souls. They were doing the right things. They were doing everything the Lord required – or so they thought. But they were just going through the motions. And aren't we the same way? We stand here and say how heartily we repent of our sins when we really don't mean it – and then go out and do the same things over and over again. We say we humbly plead for the Lord's mercy and forgiveness while withholding mercy and forgiveness from those who sin against us. And aren't there plenty of times when you know you're just going through the motions of worship and mouthing the words without really paying attention and understanding or appreciating what it is you're doing – and then you have the audacity to think that the Lord is pleased that at least you came to worship?

Am I making you uncomfortable? I hope so, because that's the goal: to move you out of your comfort zone, because that's exactly where you need to be. If not, then you aren't listening. You're not listening to me or to John the Baptizer. And you're not listening to the Lord – the Lord whose Holy Spirit is speaking to you in a still small voice within your heart telling you that

there is something rotten in there: sins you don't want to admit or confess, sins you don't want to let go of, sins that you're quite comfortable with and would prefer to continue in. Listen to that voice – that voice crying in the wilderness. Become uncomfortable. Feel the heat of God's wrath. Sense the uncleanness within. Fear the Lord's coming judgment. And repent. Turn away from your sins. And then you will be ready and well prepared to receive the coming Savior.

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor”, John tells us. “He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” It's a fascinating image that John gives us with which to picture the Lord Jesus and what he does. And to fully appreciate it, it's necessary to understand that the Temple in Jerusalem was built on what had been a threshing floor. With our modern methods of agriculture, that may require a bit of explanation. For a threshing floor they usually selected a flat, stone outcropping on top of a hill or ridge – where erosion had washed away the soil and left behind a hard surface less susceptible to erosion. After harvesting their wheat, they'd spread the kernels over one of these naturally occurring stone floors and do something to put the grains under pressure. They might beat them with rods, or have draft animals walk on them, perhaps pulling a wooden sled that squeezed the grains of wheat as it passed over them. They did this to break up and dislodge the inedible paper-like husk that surrounds each kernel. And then what they'd do is use the winnowing fork or shovel to throw the grain into the air, allowing the wind to carry off the lighter chaff of broken husks while the much heavier wheat grains fell straight to the ground. In this way the wheat and chaff were separated, and the cleansed grain was made fit for use.

This is what Jesus does for us in his Temple – here in his church. We are like the grains of wheat that have been harvested, covered with something unacceptable to the Lord, namely our sins. And John's part is to be the pressure that's applied. He puts us under stress and squeezes us until it hurts to break up that comfortable coating of sin we live in. This is what repentance is. But then Jesus does his part. He raises us up and cleanses and separates us from our sins. Though not stated here specifically by John, Jesus does us by raising us up with him on his cross, where he became the sacrifice for our sins. That's where and how he takes our sins away and destroys them. And then, having been cleansed, we are fit to be gathered into his barn – the place he will keep us for all eternity.

But that's the final goal. Until then, the cycles of planting and harvest go on. We receive the seed of God's Word, it grows in us and produces fruit – and yet, everything we do is tainted by sin. So we come here to the threshing floor where John does his work of moving us out of our comfort zones and driving us to repentance, and Christ does his of cleansing us from all our sins and giving us new life in himself. These repeated cycles of planting and harvest, threshing and winnowing, are what keep us ready and well prepared to meet the Lord when he comes in judgment. So may the Lord Jesus in his mercy continue this work among us from now until he comes. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!