



On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, the Gospel tells us that John the Baptist's message fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" John the Baptist is presented as one who prepares the way for the Lord.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that Jesus enters our human history following a line of holy men and women who looked forward to God's promise that baptizes us into a changed life. As it is written in Isaiah, the prophet: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

I need your prayers this morning on the subject: **"John the Baptizer, An Old Timer-Old Gangster."**

In today's preparation for the coming of Christmas, John the Baptist enters the scene. People wondered about John the Baptizer. They had reasons to be surprised by him. He came from the desert. He did not work. He did not own anything. He did not eat bread made by human hands. He did not drink wine pressed from the grapes. He ate nature as it fell from God's hands: grasshoppers, locusts, snails, and honey. He did not use an ounce of textile; he was dressed in camel's skin with a leather girdle made of another skin.

His teaching was remarkable, too, because it was hard-hitting and one sided. He announced without hesitation that, as far as he was concerned, god's judgment was very near, and everybody would be cut down like a tree and thrown in a fire that would never go out. He maintained that everyone should change his life, and quickly, without hesitation- policemen, soldiers, and housewives. His message was somber and grim, dark and heavy. And you all know that Jesus and John the Baptist knew each other since childhood. In fact, Mary made the journey all the way to John the Baptist's mother's house when she was pregnant with him, after she was told that she would become the mother of the Messiah. And so, it was the two who got along very well together.

When John grew up, he joined a unique mission. And that mission was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. How he ever knew that this would be his, we do not know. But we know that he spent some time with the Essenes and these were a group of strict observance Jews waiting for the Messiah and he felt quite at home there.

Jesus understood the mission of John. As the years passed, Jesus himself grew to manhood, left the carpenter's bench and went off into the Jordan Valley and was baptized by John. John got frightened and he said to Jesus, "no not me!" Jesus said: "Oh yes, by you cousin!" Jesus was baptized to show that he shared the feelings, the prophetic inspiration, and the prophetic impulse of Saint John. He answered the call to be a prophetic voice and to be a forerunner for his star-child cousin, Jesus. John was right in the Old Testament -old school way, according to the Old Testament pattern. With John, the Old Testament closed....

Jesus made the difference very clear. He spoke about a complete break. He said: "Up to this time of John it was the law and the prophets; since then, it is the kingdom of God." John lamented; Jesus rejoiced. John

sang a funeral hymn, Jesus broke bread. John refused to drink wine; Jesus changed all the water in the kitchen to wine. John dressed in a camel's skin, Jesus in a customized shirt without a seam. John warned; Jesus invited. They were in fact so different that they started to wonder about each other. John sent to his disciples to Jesus to ask him: "are you really the one?" Jesus answered: "You, John are the greatest of the Old Timers, but the smallest of the new timers is greater than you!"

Something new had started-the kingdom of God. Women of God, you have bene invited into that kingdom, the kingdom of the new era. We are invited not only to profit positively from it, but to build it.

**John the Baptist** is a wonderful figure, a very courageous man. He could get maybe a little out of hand he was so dedicated to the coming of the kingdom of God and the meaning of what God was doing.

And he knew that God was doing it, not out of revenge for sin as some people think, he was doing it to save and heal the people that somehow had turned away from Him.

And so, his message was "Repent." But it wasn't repent the way we think about it. The way we think about repentance is you come down on your knees and bang your head on the floor and say how sorry you are. He was talking about something quite different. He was talking about...

The word "repentance" means metanoia. **Metanoia** is the word that is used when we say, "Come back to the Lord." And what it really means is to turn your life around. Stop walking all over the place in those silly little pasts, full of harm to yourself and hopelessness to others, and come back. God is calling. The Messiah is here.

And anyone who stood in their way, as very often certain Pharisees and Sadducees, who thought that they were spokesmen for God and spoke a

very, very harsh kind of religion, a religion of rules and regulations that had no heart and no feeling, when he turned on them his anger came out.

Because they would see sin as breaking the law. But John the Baptist knew that sin was a failure to love, and it still is.

It's a failure to love, to do what you know you should do, to be the kind of person you know that you can become, to do and walk with Jesus, for Jesus has come for only one purpose and it is to teach us how to love.

Integral to the season of Advent is the person and ministry of John the Baptist. He was, in every way, a strange character. His clothing was made of animal hair. He ate locusts and wild honey for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He spent much of his time in the wilderness, far from human company. When he came to town, to where people lived, it was usually to scream at the top of his lungs, calling everyone to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

No one was spared. He challenged the soldiers and the tax collectors. He called out the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Not even the commoners were exempt. While many of them were pious, some were not. And none were free from sin. John the Baptist was intolerant of sin and even less patient with hypocrites. His invitation to everyone was simple: producing fruits as evidence of righteousness.

We appreciate John the Baptist better when we understand his mission in relation to the ministry of the promised Messiah, whose coming he dedicated his entire life to heralding. John knew what the coming of the Messiah meant for his people, who at that time were languishing under an oppressive Roman regime. He was deeply concerned about the pervasiveness of injustice in the land, especially the suffering of the poor—those at the receiving end of military brutality, extortion, and all other forms of dehumanization. He was saddened that so many of his

people had abandoned the path of righteousness and had succumbed to despair. Above all, he understood the urgency of his mission. He was preparing the way for the Messiah, the only true king of justice and prince of peace.

In this season of Advent, the church presents John the Baptist to us as a model. John teaches us that waiting for the coming of Christ is not merely a joyful expectation—it is also careful preparation. It requires a commitment to making the world more just for everyone. It involves fearlessly challenging the structures of sin and oppression. Often, it means standing courageously against abusive power, protesting if necessary. Most importantly, it demands that our lives, at every moment, embody the fullness of the gospel of Christ, especially its emphasis on love, justice, mercy, and peace.

John the Baptist's total commitment to his mission as the herald of the Messiah is therefore very instructive. Pope Francis reminds us, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) that, through our baptism, God has called us all to be missionary disciples. This means that, like John the Baptist, everything about us must point to the Christian message. It is not enough to proclaim the gospel with our lips; we must live it.

As in John the Baptist's time, our world today faces a myriad of challenges. Many parts of the world are experiencing violent crises: Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, Indianapolis-USA. Numerous people continue to live under repressive regimes and inhuman conditions. We must never forget that we are the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus to a world desperately in need of peace, justice, and mercy.

**The good news** is not just the imminence of justice and peace, but that it is through our lives and ministry that the justice and peace of God will flourish.

This is the second week of the new church year and the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is preparation for the arrival of the reign of God, which begins with God coming into the world through the birth of Jesus, a singularly important event. Times of preparation are both significant and familiar parts of our daily and religious life. Most of us are familiar with the times spent preparing for an important test or even preparing for an important meal. Religiously, many take time to prepare for prayer, or even ponder “reflection questions” before Sunday Mass. In our religious tradition, we are also familiar with the importance of times of preparation. The forty years that the Jews spent in the desert, the time to build the temple, and the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert before his public ministry all point to the importance of and need for a time of preparation.

**In today’s Gospel,** John the Baptist urges people to make time for preparation before the arrival of the longed-for reign of God. Matthew focuses on John as a prophet, a person in the line of prophets of the Hebrew people who tried to help the people see God working in their midst. Thus, John dresses and acts like a traditional prophet, wearing camel hair with a leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey. He is like Samson, Samuel, or Elijah who also spoke of resistance to injustice and looked for social reform.

John understands himself preparing for one whom he is not worthy to even carry his sandals, and one who will clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn. He also is asking the people to prepare themselves for the arrival of God’s reign and the arrival of the Messiah. The repentance he seeks is more than personal but instead is a social transformation that leads to just relationships being lived throughout society. 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. The Pharisees drew importance from maintaining their ancestral heritage, by faithfully keeping religious traditions. To call them offspring of snakes suggests that their way of life is largely a “show,” and challenges them to show “good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”

At that time there was great unrest with authority, both civil and religious. Both Rome and the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem exploited the common person by not confronting the systems that kept most people in need of even the necessities for life. Ancestral property was confiscated, and taxes were unaffordable high. The social climate was one of unrest and desire for change. Many gave in to grumbling and complaining. Others looked for a Messiah, someone from the outside, who would bring about the changes for which they longed. Instead of giving in to grumbling and complaining, John preached repentance to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. But John looked for a Messiah who would come with power to change the world order of the day. “I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I.” (Matthew 3:11)

The Gospel text that the Church has chosen for this second Sunday of Advent is a challenge to us in this time of Advent. This time of preparation is not just for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but also for commitment to living in the Kingdom of God that Jesus’ birth inaugurated. It calls the church to look beyond individual transformation, to changes in society and our institutions that are needed and ask what part we might be asked to play in the reality in which each of us lives.

***Reflection Questions for the advent-the Christmas season:***

1. When you think about Advent being a time of preparation, what are your memories of times of preparation in your own life?

2. What were some of the feelings that arose within you during such periods?
3. How have times of preparation helped you to be the person you are today? How have those experiences helped you in your spiritual journey?
4. How does today's Gospel fit with the way you have been thinking about the coming of Christmas?
5. What comes to mind as you hear Matthew describing John as being in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey, and preaching repentance?
6. What are some of the things that arise in you as you hear John's message in today's Gospel?
7. By coming out to be baptized, people were publicly admitting their faults. Has there ever been a time when you were willing or even needed to admit your failures?
8. Can you take some time to talk with God about your desire to use this time before Christmas as a time for preparation for the arrival of God and God's reign, or some other hope for God's lived presence in your life or in greater society?