

ADVENT TWO, YEAR B, DECEMBER 3, 2023

Mark says crowds came to hear him. Big crowds! Not crowds thronging to the Met Life stadium or to Radio City Music Hall, not to the latest Broadway musical, or to a pop or rock concert, but to hear a prophet call them to repentance. Crowds of them, vast crowds, going out to hear John the Baptist.

I think it's fair to say that Mark does exaggerate somewhat. He says that all the country people of Judea went, and all the citizens of Jerusalem made the pilgrimage out in the wilderness to hear John's message. This is Mark's exaggeration for a very big crowd indeed. But it's true John the Baptist was a person of widespread influence and power. His voice crying out in the wilderness bore a message of hope and joy.

The setting is unlikely by our standards. John appeared in the Judean wilderness which was a desert place, not of drifting sand but a barren expanse of limestone country. It really was an outlandish place for a preaching mission. But then, John was an outlandish figure. Some believe John had been a member of a desert community of monks, similar to those who had their monastery at Qumran. Others believed he had been one of those religious hermits of the desert, submitting himself irrevocably to the will of God. We really don't know.

What we do know is that when he became public, his mission to call his people back to faith was a sensation. He was the greatest sensation of his age, as he preached down there in the wilderness, close to the Jordan River. The kind of popularity he had would be like contemporary sensations over the years such as Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Back Street Boys Taylor Swift and Beyonce.

It had been hundreds of years since the Jews had seen a great prophet. It was a part of their belief that near the end of the old era, before God sent his Messiah to usher in the new age, they would be given a prophet with the courage of Elijah. And John was seen as that prophet - a powerful figure preparing the way for the Messiah. From every direction the crowds made their pilgrimage through inhospitable territory to hear John the baptizer say: "repent, and be baptized."

It may not sound like it to you, but John's message was one of hope and joy. Too often people think of John as a harsh figure, a prophet of doom and gloom, demanding painful repentance and warning of dire consequences if they failed to repent.

That is only partly true. It is true that John was a tough, fiery character. It is true that his warnings were stern. But the much larger truth is that John was proclaiming that something wonderful was about to happen. He clearly saw himself as the forerunner, preparing the way for the promised Messiah. Great joy was going to break out. Hopes were going to be fulfilled. He called people to get themselves ready for joy.

This is a positive message. He asked the people to repent. Again, we tend to think of repentance as a negative thing, of giving up pleasures. The aspect we forget is that repentance is an act of hope. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry and giving things up. It means literally "to turn around", to change the focus in one's life. We sometimes use words like 'conversion' or 'being born again' to describe the kind of transformation that takes place. I suspect that many of us find it 'unepiscopalian' to speak in such terms of being repentant or having one's life turned around. But the

gospel clearly calls us to allow God to transform our lives. Repentance is a complete turn around in one life. It is turning from something disastrous to something wonderful.

Think about that for a moment: it is turning to something far better. It is like turning from eating oat meal to eating a steak, like turning from a dead end to an open highway, like turning from a stagnant puddle to a bubbling spring.

I think our biggest fear about repentance or conversion is not that we will face change, but that we will somehow change. Will we suddenly become "Jesus freaks" or be seen as fanatics? But to repent or be converted is not to become a new and strange person. It is rather opening ourselves up to new dimensions.

There's a story of a woman who went on a religious revival weekend. She was a church secretary. Her rector cautioned her not to let the experience change her too much. The weekend turned out to be a wonderfully fulfilling experience for her, a time of real renewal in her life. She came back filled with excitement. She wanted very much to share what had happened with him. But she feared that he would misunderstand its importance. So she decided how to tell him. She went into his office. At first, he didn't really look up. He kept on working and said, "Well! Did it change you?" She said, "Well, what do you think?" Then he looked up at her and broke into gales of laughter. She was wearing a hot pink fright wig.

Advent is a time of renewal, a time for continuity as well as change. Our talents and gifts are being redirected. When we repent or turn ourselves around we open ourselves to our full potential. It is a positive and joyful experience.

For John, he saw that since Elijah's great revival, people whose wealth had increased found their commitment to God's ethic of love, justice, and mercy no longer concerned them. In the most profound disobedience, they turned their backs on the widow and the orphan, scorned their neighbors, and served themselves and not their God. John saw they needed to turn away from the insidious lies, false values, deceits, injustices, bondages and hopelessness of the old era, towards the beauty, justice, truth and peace of the new age which was about to dawn. What they were turning to gloriously exceeded by far even the very best among the things they were turning from.

For John the baptizer, the old era was doomed. It was decaying and destined for the scrap heap. God was ushering in a new age which was close at hand. John was not sure of the shape of this new world. It was enough for him that it was of God and from God. It would have new values and a fair go for all the neglected and mistreated people who had no champion or saviour.

When tax collectors, those disgraced Jews who were contractors for the hated Romans, asked John how they should express their repentance, John answered: "Collect no more taxes than are honest and fair." To inquiries from soldiers who repented, he said: "No more wanton violence, no more looting, no false accusations." To ordinary people in the crowd who asked John how to live in preparation for the new age, the baptizer advised: "If you have two coats, share one with the person who has none. If you have food, share it with the hungry."

This was the future. In repentance, they were turning not towards some greater religiosity with burdensome restrictions, but to a radical life-style with wonderful opportunities for practical justice and love and peace. John was positive and joyful about his better world that was to come with the Messiah.

Maybe it is time for us to travel into the wilderness and listen to John the baptizer. Sanity for us is to allow John to speak to us in the wilderness of our contemporary world.. Let his challenge to repentance confront our present situation. Let the positive note outweigh the negative elements. Let the future he looked forward to entice us. Let the Messiah he longed for enthrall us.

The truth is this remarkable prophet can lead us to a Christmas which is rooted in the radical issues of life, and which celebrates a joy which out rates all other pleasure or happiness. But the real truth and question to ask is: Are we ready for it? Amen.