

ADVENT II

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' " John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:1-8

What do we mostly think about during the Advent Season? At St. John's maybe, selling Christmas trees. We think about shopping and parties and all that pre-Christmas bustle, and we think about Matthew's and Luke's account of the nativity story, the Coming of Christ. Maybe we remember John's elegant prologue; *In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* We think about the birth in the manger in the humble stable, the angels and shepherds and the three kings. All that beloved, familiar, beautiful legend. All those hymns that can make us teary-eyed or starry-eyed.

And in that cherished context, the beginning of Mark's Gospel can seem not only abrupt but also vaguely disappointing. No angelic pronouncement anticipating Jesus birth, no angelic hosts proclaiming Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all. No word of Christ's place in creation signaling the importance of what's to follow.

Instead, we have John the Baptizer, a crusty guy whose voice cries in the wilderness, who's preaching about repentance. He wears camel skins and eats locusts and wild honey, a rather stark diet. He seems like someone out of time, out of a more primitive era, a desert nomad.

But as he announces, he is a forerunner of Jesus. He comes to prepare the way for one more powerful than he. He is a bridge figure between the time of the Hebrew prophets and the One about whom they prophesied.

John himself is the subject of prophecy. *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.* That's John. And John's weird dress identifies him with the tradition of the prophet Elijah.

John is not simply a forerunner because he announces Jesus' imminent arrival. They share a common location: the wilderness. The wilderness is John's home. And Jesus will have to serve his forty days there, a place of testing and trial, a place of hardship and suffering, physical and spiritual, before he can begin his public ministry. The desert is his initiation.

And both are proclaimers: John proclaims a baptism of repentance and the nearness of Jesus, Jesus proclaims a baptism of love and forgiveness and the nearness of the realm of God.

And finally, though it stands outside this passage, John is also the forerunner of Jesus in being handed over to death. In so many ways, John shows Jesus how to live, and shows him how to die: defiantly, courageously, with a passion for justice to the very end.

John is not Jesus' father, he's not either God or Joseph. But I think he is Jesus' spiritual father. And thus he invites us to remember and give thanks, this Advent season, for our own spiritual fathers and mothers, our spiritual ancestors.

And I don't mean this, necessarily, in some abstract way. I've talked about several people who seemed to me to be emotional mothers to me: our childhood nanny, my grandmother. By emotional mothers I mean that they taught me things about love and intimacy – for better and for worse– that my own mother was not capable of providing. They gave me grounding, and my grandmother introduced me to a life of Christian devotion.

And I've talked often about my priest and soul friend Dick Martin. He was my spiritual father, though we were close in age, as the Baptizer and his cousin Jesus were close in age. Dick taught me about my vocation to the priesthood, and, later, he taught me about dying, about how to die, how to be

faithful even unto death and about how to be faithful to the dying and the dead. He was, indeed, my spiritual father.

I think, and pray, that we all have such spiritual parents, in addition to our birth parents. They guide us by word and example, they prepare us for the world, and prepare the world for us, they show us how to live and sometimes how to die, they accompany us in the wilderness, they keep us on the path of righteousness, or, if we have strayed, they lovingly call us back. They love us with a love that goes beyond birth and blood.

Take a moment now and remember who your spiritual parents might be. Perhaps they come instantly to mind. Perhaps you will go home thinking about who they might be. In any event, I urge you to give thanks for them, to pray for their well-being and the blessings of God upon them, wherever they may be.

And I also invite you, in this time of stewardship and giving, to remember our spiritual ancestors whose lives and devotion were spent in this building, whose vision and generosity have bequeathed to us this building, which is our heartache and our joy and blessing. They have left us a legacy of stone and glass, and also a legacy of faith and hope, of mission and ministry. And as you remember them, please give with you own generous spirit to enable us to continue their vision and their faith into the future, so that we may be spiritual ancestors to those who will come after us, who will worship here, who will sorrow and rejoice inside these sacred walls.

Amen

