

So, we arrive this week in the second week of Advent, the week of St. Nicholas Day, and we are confronted in this week not just with St. Nicholas, but also the much more terrifying figure of John the Baptist, much less cuddly and friendly. If you want to make sure that Advent is a penitential season, then you think about St. John the Baptist. That's why he appears both in our readings this week and next week. John the Baptist is the one prophet that you don't want turning up to your Christmas party. He's unkempt. He'd come improperly dressed with clothes of camel hair, we're told. If he didn't smell, you can guarantee that his camel hair clothing would. And he wouldn't eat the food at your party, no matter how good it was. No doubt he'd bring a bag with his own locusts and chew on them. And you wouldn't want him talking to your guests. Can you imagine? A man with absolutely no small talk and a disconcerting way of straight talking. John the Baptist was not known for mincing his words. In other words, he's the perfect person to be thinking about in the Advent season.

This is meant to be an unsettling season, with its emphasis on the second coming of Jesus, that reminder that there will be another kingdom, that this world is not all that there is. Advent is all about stirring us up, taking us out of our slumber. And the Advent challenge is to examine our life from the point of eternity, that the coming kingdom of which we speak gives us a perspective to view our lives now, to ask big questions. How are we living our lives? Are we investing in things of eternal value?

These are unsettling questions to ask in an unsettling season, and John the Baptist was an unsettling figure. He attacks complacency. When the people went out to hear him, he'd greet them by saying, "I know what you are thinking. You think that you're okay because Abraham was your ancestor. Well, don't presume on God's mercy." In other words, don't become complacent in your relationship with God just because of your background.

I regularly hear people say to me, "I'm a cradle Episcopalian." I don't know how to react. I don't know if they're telling me that there's some special place in heaven reserved for such people. We can't presume that, because we go to church, because we've been to church every day since we were brought up, that we follow the 10 Commandments,

that we don't hurt anybody, that we're living, we can't presume we're living the life that God wants us to live, that we're receiving all that He wants to give us and bless us with. God is always calling us into a deeper and deeper relationship with Him. There's always more to learn. We're not to be complacent. And Advent is a time to be shaken out of our complacency, to prepare for the coming kingdom.

In Advent, we prepare for the coming of the king, for the coming of Jesus, and that preparation begins in the wilderness. You may have noticed at the start of that gospel reading which I read, there was a lot of detail..."In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod ruler of Galilee, Philip was the ruler of Iturea, Lysanias was the ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests." That seems way over the top. TMI, my children would shout.

Luke lists seven people in positions of power, both religious and political, seven rulers enjoying the comfort of influence. Seven rulers, but John is not one of them. Whilst they're in their palaces, John is out roughing it in the wilderness. Power and comfort can't mask our need for God. In the starkness of the wilderness, our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities are exposed. It's uncomfortable. Advent begins in an uncomfortable place. Advent begins with an honest wilderness-style reckoning of sin. We can't get to the manger in Bethlehem unless we go through John. And John the Baptist is all about sin and repentance. Advent is an invitation to follow John the Baptist out into the wilderness. It's an invitation to take a serious look at ourselves, to go deeper than thinking, "I may make the occasional misstep," or, "I have my issues."

We can go deeper than that. Advent is a place to really reckon with how it is with our souls. And we might have the same experience as the first hearers of John the Baptist. Something about the wilderness experience and John's message brought them to their knees. In the stark expanse of the wilderness, they not only recognized their need for God, but their own need for sin and repentance. As Episcopalians, we have a tendency to avoid these words, sin and repentance. We associate them with paralyzing guilt, eternal hellfire, with fear or self-loathing. We don't associate them with grace and mercy. Yet, in Advent

we really can't avoid these things. Advent begins with an honest wilderness-style reckoning with sin.

We often think of sin as breaking God's law or missing the mark or committing certain bad acts. And such definitions aren't wrong, but they assume that the problem of sin is because it angers God. But God's temper is not what's at stake here. Sin is a problem because of the damage it does to us. Sin prevents us from being fully human, fully ourselves. It's anything which interferes with the opening of our whole hearts to God and to others and to ourselves. Sin is estrangement, it's disconnection, it's disharmony, it's the slow accumulation of dust which chokes the soul. It's the sludge that slows us down that says, "I'll quit," or, "That's impossible," or, "Nothing's going to change." Sin is a walking death, and it's easier to spot a name and confess a walking death in the wilderness than it is anywhere else.

And we should remember that John the Baptist, even John the Baptist, never talked about sin in isolation. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That's the context in which he spoke. His goal was to wake his hearers up to their sins so that they might repent and receive forgiveness. Repentance is an interesting word. It involves a turning around. The Roman military used it for "about turn". It's a meaning which comes out when I'm out driving with my wife, Laura. And actually, GPS is going to get its second mention of the service because I'm amazed that, even with GPS on our phone, we still are always getting lost.

I might, if I'm driving, take a certain road that leads us the wrong way and I'll regret it. I'll certainly regret it if Laura had told me to go another way. And that regret might turn to remorse. But regret and remorse are different to repentance, because I only repent of my mistake if I turn the car around and go back a different way. That's repentance, a turning around, a going a different way. The baptism of repentance John offered was forgiveness of sins. It was for going a different way, which is why a few verses later Luke says, "And with many words, other words, John exhorted the people and preached good news to them." Even John the Baptist was preaching good news because he was preaching the way that led to God.

Forgiveness of sins is always good news. I wasn't a very naughty boy when I was young. My mother's watching, but she's not here to correct that statement, so I'm going to stick with it. I wasn't a very naughty boy when I was young, but I was capable of the odd naughtiness. This isn't particularly naughty, but on one occasion I was playing outside the church, the front of the church. My father was a rector. And he had a modern church with huge 70-foot windows at the front of the church. Sadly, I was playing with a golf club, so you know what happened next. The top of my backswing, there was the sound of glass cracking. And one of these huge windows had a hole in it. So I did, as all young boys would do in that context, I ran home, ran up into the bathroom, and locked the door, waiting for my father to come and ask what the matter was.

And behind the locked door, I confessed my sin, my crime. And of course, my father forgave me. He knew it was an accident. And when I was assured that I'd been forgiven, I felt able to unlock the door and resume my life. Now, to many of us, we are locked behind a spiritual bathroom door that we daren't come out because we don't know what's waiting on the other side. But God longs to forgive us. We can open that door. The relationship can be restored as we turn and walk with Him. We're called to repent and examine our lives because we can be sure of God's forgiveness and acceptance. John the Baptist's call to repentance was always accompanied by that promise of forgiveness. We can live boldly as God's forgiven people.

Advent is a very rich season in the church's year because it has these challenging themes. And it's hard to keep focused on them when everything around us is so Christmassy. And I'm mindful that even in a couple of hours the Christmas parade is going right past our front door. But let's do all we can to mark this Advent season by finding time to reflect. Let's use it to take an honest look at ourselves and to ask some daring questions. Are we in danger of being complacent in our walk with God? Are we open to risk the wilderness so that we might hear a word from God? And dare we acknowledge our failing so that we can repent and live as God's forgiven people? These are all Advent themes, so let's try and stay with them a while in the midst of all the tinsel and baubles of the Christmas season. Amen.