

FOCUS: The Good News is the Christ Child is coming, so be prepared!

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John the Baptist is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. I love to read about him. I love to hear his preaching. I love to read what others have to say about him. He also scares the bejeebers out of me. Here he is, the first character, other than the narrator, who speaks to us in Mark's gospel.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John appears in the wilderness—the desert, really, proclaiming the coming of one more powerful. John called all who would listen to come for a baptism of repentance from sin in preparation for the baptism of the one to come, the baptism by the Holy Spirit.

The people were, metaphorically speaking, dying in the desert. The Chosen People were not being 100% faithful to the Lord Most High. They were listening to many voices calling to them in the desert of their lack of faith and faithfulness. It was tough enough in the first century to live, let alone to live in the desert, without any of the comforts or technology of the 21st century. It was even tougher, to be sure, to live in the “desert” of unfaithfulness. Remember, in biblical imagery, to speak of the “desert” is to speak of God-forsaken territory, of land being held by the archenemy of God and the realm of unsatiated hunger and thirst. To be in the desert, biblically speaking, was to be dying of hunger and thirst in the presence of the enemy of God.

We, too, are often in the 21st century desert of high technology, high consumerism, high individuality and the like. To live in this desert, not unlike living in the physical deserts, can be life-threatening for us. These high deserts are all too often devoid of faith, love, hope, and most importantly, of God and the salvation that comes to us through God's grace. Before the Israelites heard the voice of the prophet Isaiah as they wandered in exile before restoration, we, too, hear the voices of many false prophets today. False prophets shout out that we can find peace and happiness and beauty in the right cars, the right foods, the right cosmetics, the right music in worship, the right kind of relationships. For Mark, it is listening to these voices of false prophets that put us in the center of what Mark calls sin. It's listening to—and *following*—these false prophets that leads to our need for repentance.

If we never hear the gospel message, the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in our deserts, then we will surely die in our deserts. The Gospel is the fuel we need to survive in the wilderness of human life. Without it, we will die in the desert, empty of the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, *ruach* in Hebrew, which created us.

So then, dear sisters and brothers, if we are dying or at risk of dying in the desert, what is the prognosis for recovery?

Well, the first is that there *is* Good News in our desert, and that is not John the Baptist calling us, but Jesus Christ. Oh yes, John is a great warm-up for us—not unlike Ed McMahon was to Johnny Carson. Without John the Baptist, we probably wouldn't realize the trouble we are in as we live in our own secular deserts. John provides for us the alarm we need to wake us from the slumber and drowsiness we experience as we run short of *ruach*, or breath. Instead of listening to all the voices in the desert, we can heed John's call to hear the voices of *truth* that call out to us in the wilderness. John's voice calls out to us for repentance, and Jesus' voice calls out the truth of the good news—that our sins are forgiven. And how does the good news, the forgiveness of sins, come about? By Jesus coming and joining all of us sinners and receiving John's baptism—a baptism Jesus truly didn't *need*—and then Jesus entered “straightway” into the desert. Not just the physical desert that Mark describes Jesus being sent into by the Holy Spirit following his baptism, but the “desert” of our own lives. By coming into our “desert,” Jesus provides for us exactly what we need—the living water that cleanses us and quenches our thirst.

When we don't hear the voice of the messenger, it's often because the message is being overwhelmed by false messengers and we have difficulty distinguishing the “signal”—the Good News—from the “noise”—everything else. When we listen to John's voice and his call to repentance and Jesus' voice and his declaration of our absolution, we are doing the “listening” called faith. Indeed, Paul is correct when he said “faith comes by hearing.” It is a message that is played over and over, coming on top of the droning of the false prophets and those who seek to pull us *away* from the Good News. It's a message that is often well-delivered, particularly in this day of slick advertising, media overload, and the constant bombardment of messages about everything under the sun that will make us feel better, look prettier, love longer, live higher. The droning can overpower us and overwhelm the Good News. But if we listen with care—listen faithfully—we *can* separate the droning from the melody and hear the Good News and be strengthened by it. The voice of John and of Jesus cuts through the noise, calling out “Even with all that tries to drown us out, repent and believe the Good News!”

Sisters and brothers, even today we, and all Christians, live in the deserts. But even though we live in the deserts, we listen and follow another voice. We are strengthened and fed and nurtured in our deserts by Christ and the Holy Spirit. We hear the Good News, and our faith is strengthened and our ability to listen to the message over the noise is strengthened. As we hear and believe, we too become a part of the message, a part of the signal sounding out over all of the noise. We become light John the Baptist—even if we aren't wearing camel hair clothes and eating locusts and

wild honey. We are called to proclaim the Good News, dear friends. That's you and you and you *as well as* those of us called to be pastors and theologians of the church. Proclaiming the Good News is *our* vocation, *our* calling. And like John, we won't always be well-received by those to whom we take the message. Some will look at us and think we are crazy and dressed funny. Some will see us and hear us and still not believe. We cannot let ourselves be discouraged. John the Baptist met challenges as he called for the people to repent, yet he didn't let the noise overwhelm the message to be prepared for the One to come.

We are but a few weeks from the night on which we will celebrate the birth of the One to come. It is *so* easy for us to get caught up in the secular noise of the season, to be overwhelmed, to experience sensory overload. Be prepared for it. Be prepared to listen for the message above the noise. Be prepared for a life-changing experience as you listen. Be prepared, and as you do so, prepare the way of the Lord. Thanks be to God!