

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 2nd Sunday Advent Year B

John the Baptist! Interesting about John is that for one ‘crying out in wilderness’ and he was a fiery popular preacher, great crowds came to Jordan, but he actually says very little in these gospels. He uses very few words! And today’s gospel, the opening lines are him speaking, but not his own words, He is quoting Old Testament Malachi and Isaiah; not even his own words! I wonder if John ever wanted to yell, “Do I have to say it- wo got to get ready!” Everything about him announces “God is coming.” So, John doesn’t say a lot; he’s almost all action. His message is his ‘presentation’ and ‘practices’ , not multiplying sermons or stretching out more and more words.

Basically, John preaches only this ‘Prepare the Way of the Lord’ and that is not original, that is Isaiah’s words talking there. John only adds, “Repent & be baptized”! That’s it. Not a lot of words come from him, but its all in his practices and presentation. His simple life & actions tell us all we need to know. What do we hear about him? First, John shows up alone in the desert, eats wild honey and locusts, wears crude camel’s hair and simple leather belt, and works, praying, living humbly and baptizing. John is all action! But that *life/witness* is maybe what is most prophetic about prophets. They demonstrate the authenticity of their message in their live acts! Repeatedly, the Prophets embodied their message for dramatic effect. So John today gives us a course in what bible scholars call, “Sign-Acts” or ‘Medium is the message’. The actions declare the call; the prophet acts out the message; Think of it like “Word-pictures”-a point made by drawing it out-like in game of Pictionary or charades or some call them “living parables” a story is told by the evocative personal details in the prophet’s own life. Don’t we all love a good ‘visual aid’? For example, let’s say I just stood up here and didn’t say a word, but I held a six foot sickle, or scythe, you’d get the point of ‘judgement day-grim reaper’. So John, just like a bunch prophets who went before him, performed dramatic gestures to communicate God’s message to His people. I suggest that his mere location in the desert wilderness says a lot; It means we need to get out of your routine-step away from the bustle of commerce in the city, the nonstop tweets and dings of our devices (there is no phone signal in desert). Come to the quiet to get down to work of salvation.... 5G? We really only need 1 G-God. But, also, John’s clothing, his diet, his work baptizing, and not just anywhere but specifically at the Jordan river; All of these actions speak volumes in the language of prophetic sign actions. It is refreshing to keep in mind that John comes in a

long line of such symbolic acts of prophecy: We could call it 'street theater' or 'performative messages'. The Old Testament has some pretty shocking--pretty colorful & dramatic deeds from prophets. Let me highlight a couple:

Jeremiah 28:10-13 tells of Jeremiah creatively (God told him to) put a wooden yoke around his neck (like cattle would wear) and walk through the streets to show the people the yoke they bear to the king of Babylon because they rejected Yahweh. Drama doesn't end there, it turns out a false prophet attacks Jeremiah and breaks apart the wooden yoke to which God says, "Fine, Jeremiah, now make an iron one and wear it around to show them." Take that!

Isaiah 20:2-4 has Isaiah the prophet told by God to streak in his birthday suit for three years bare and barefoot through the city, to demonstrate how the people will be led away by the Assyrians in slavery stripped of all their homes and possessions because they fought with God and turned against Yahweh.

Ezekiel, in 4:8, is told by God to wrap himself bound up in ropes and lay on the ground in front of everyone as a sign that their faithlessness has tied them up in sin and pain. But even more colorful, in Ezekiel 4:12, God told him to bake some barley bread over a fire fueled with human dung to show the sinful work of their hands, in rejecting Yahweh.

Or Ezekiel chapter 5 tells where God commanded Ezekiel to shave his head and to take a third of it and burn in fire, another third and scatter around city street and hitting it on the ground with his sword, and then the last third, to throw it to the winds at the city walls. And to not forget the message, God told him to save a few pieces and sew them into the hem of his tunic.

Jesus comes along with his own such public displays/or visual aids, as in Mark 11:12-26, Jesus will curse a fig tree and then go cleanse the temple, then return fig tree is dead & dried up (condemnation of the Temple-which burns up in 70AD) (You can read the full demonstration in Mark 11:12-14 about the tree; then verses 15-19 about the temple, and then about the tree again in verses 20-26). So John is right in this line of prophetic drama-deeds, seen in his life's details. His location is symbolic. He is in the desert, meaning we have to step out of all distractions that fill our lives with commotion and diversions. Symbolic clothes: He wears camel's hair and a simple leather belt to show that God will always provide for us wherever we are (the clothes are an exact uniform of what Elijah wore (2 kings 1:8) And the same with symbolic wild honey and locusts, that God will provide from the terrain we are in (however rough or unlikely we might think it is to get something good and tasty- God can surprise us providing meat and sweetness (protein and sugar) even in the desert),

and the symbolic dramatic action of baptizing meant both 1) washing away and being purified of whatever we let go of to enter the desert, and the 2) dipping / descending and ascending-going down into water and coming back up that marks rebirth-new life. (Also of course, doing a water walk through at the Jordan river, made everyone with Jewish backgrounds recall the red sea crossing of Moses and the Jordan crossing of Joshua entering the Promised Land and its all new life!)

You may wonder now, though, “Okay great: so John the Baptist was good at acting out his message: what does that mean to us now?” Well, add to John’s actions of conversion and trust in God, the fact that we are about to welcome not just a messiah into our lives come Christmas but we call this Messiah the Word made flesh (John 1:14). So, our sign of authentic reception of Jesus will also be shown or not in our life’s demonstrations: So how are we reflecting our salvation? When the Pharisees came out to John to be baptized, John’s word to them was simply, “Show works worthy of repentance!” (Matthew 3:8). So as we ready ourselves and prepare for Christmas, how are we showing our repentance in action?