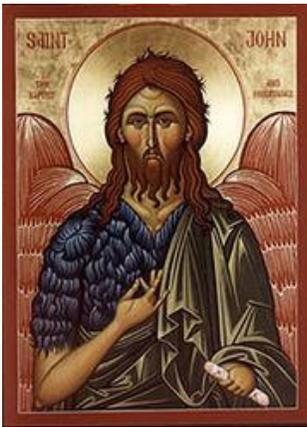


"...the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (St. Mark 1:3b)



In our Gospel reading for today's Eucharist, we have one of the major figures of Advent. It is the figure of John the Baptist. He is the last in a long line of prophets. He is the last prophet of the Old Testament. He comes to tell us not what we want to hear, but rather what we need to hear.

A number of years ago, inflatable Christmas lawn decorations were all the rage. You could get an inflatable Santa Claus, or an inflatable Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, or even an inflatable Christmas penguin.

Somehow, I don't think that John the Baptist will ever be offered as an inflatable Christmas lawn decoration. He's just too serious, imposing and odd. We're told he wore a camel hair coat and a leather belt around his waist. Have you ever smelled a camel? Camels don't smell very good. I wonder what the evangelist might be saying about John by including this detail. He lived out in the wilderness and I'm sure he didn't spend a lot of time on his personal appearance.

And yet, John is the fulfillment of an important Old Testament prophecy from the prophet Isaiah. "Behold the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight."

Truth be told, at this time of the year, we don't like dealing with John. We would rather deal with Santa Claus, or Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, or even a Christmas penguin. We don't like dealing with John because he knows the truth about our world and us and we don't really want to hear the truth about our world and ourselves.

Here's a good example of all this: People don't want to hear the truth of what happened in Ferguson, Missouri. What is the truth? The truth is this: It doesn't make any difference if you are black, white, yellow, brown, or if you are Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer; if you try to take away a policeman's gun—you are going to get shot. You will probably be killed. End of story. Certain people do not like this truth because it does not serve their self-interest.

It also true that if you are a policeman and you shoot and kill somebody, you had better have a good reason. And it doesn't make any difference if you are black, white, yellow, brown, or if you are Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer; if you don't have a good reason, you are going to get indicted for murder and face trial. Certain people do not like this truth because it does not serve their self-interest.

You see, the system works. When the system doesn't work, it's not the system it's us!

We don't like dealing with John because he tells the truth about us. And it's not in our self-interest to hear that truth. John knows that we are not as good as we would like to think we are. He knows

that we are not as clean as we would like to think we are. He knows that we are not as righteous as we would like to think we are.

A home owner installed some new shelving in his living room. A year later he was visiting with a friend in his living room. As they were sitting and talking he noticed that his friend was becoming sort of restless. When he asked him about his agitation, his friend replied, "If you would forgive me, it's those shelves. Every one of them slopes down to the right." "Do they?" said the surprised owner. "I never noticed." Now, the visitor was a carpenter by trade. He was disturbed because he saw those shelves against a true horizontal plumb line which ran through his mind. The owner of the cabin, on the other hand, was at ease with the crookedness, even unaware of it.

What an interesting metaphor for our world, ourselves and John the Baptist. We live in a world that doesn't know it is crooked. We ourselves are often not aware that we are crooked. John comes like a master carpenter and he puts his plumb line right next to us and he reveals to us just how crooked we are. He reveals to us that we are sinners in need of redemption.

We don't like dealing with John. We don't like being told that we are crooked. We'd much rather deal with Santa Claus, or Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, or a Christmas penguin. But John refuses to go away. By the power of the Holy Spirit his voice comes to us across the centuries. He calls us to prepare the way for the Lord and to make His paths straight.

He calls us to prepare for the Lord's coming by going out into the wilderness to be baptized. He calls us to be washed of all our pretensions. To be washed of our pretensions of being good, clean and righteous on our own. He calls us to repent and to be mindful of our sins. He calls us to pray and to hold fast to God's Word for us. I hope that you are using the resource that was passed out at the beginning of Advent. It was *A Table Prayer for Advent*. This resource includes not only a meal prayer, but also a list of Scripture readings for each day in Advent. It is a way for you to hold fast to God's Word in the wilderness of Advent.

In these days of Advent, John calls us to go out with him into the wilderness. The wilderness is place of desolation, judgment and death. How will we survive in the wilderness? By doing only those things which are essential. We will survive by repentance, prayer and holding fast to God's Word.

In our Gospel reading John is out in the wilderness. John makes us a promise. He promises us that he will help us survive. He promises to help us do something very important, and that is to prepare the way of the Lord and to make His paths and our paths straight. This is just one of the many hopes of Advent. It is a hope worth waiting for. AMEN.

+Christo Gloria in Ecclesia +

Illustration: Icon of St. John the Baptist at www.orthodoxwiki.org