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Blessed John Keble, the great Anglican priest and poet of the mid 1800's writes that St. John the Baptist was *all rude and rough, such as one might find in the wilderness: to hear his earnest calls to repentance; to behold the multitudes who came to him to be baptized in the river of Jordan: and what an effect his preaching had on them, making them confess even their most grievous sins. All this they saw with wonder, and of course had a great deal to say and think about it. But St. John would not let them waste their time thinking of him.* St. John the Baptist's mission was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom, and by doing so he challenged the expectations of all who heard him. For Heaven's message of Joy to come was wrapped up in a call to repentance, and the messenger of such great tidings was a coarse, rough, and rude herald.

St. John the Baptist is probably one of the most interesting characters in the Bible, and certainly one of the oddest. John the Baptist was born to Zacharias the priest, and Elizabeth the cousin of the Blessed Virgin Mary in their old age. According to one of our Bishops St. Elizabeth had the most ideal pregnancy ever recorded, because when Zacharias doubted that Elizabeth was with child, he was made to be mute for nine months! The child who leaped in his mother's womb in the presence of the unborn Christ Child grew up to become a wild man, a man living in the wilderness, eating only locusts and wild honey, and clothed with camel fur and a rough leather belt. Despite his odd habits and strange clothing, he was a sensation throughout all Israel. He was so popular that he even had disciples of his own, and even more surprising, the unpopular and depraved puppet King, Herod, regarded him as a prophet. The people flocked to hear John preach, and to be baptized by him, and it is thought that to have been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River was quite the experience. It is thought that he held you under water while you confessed your sins. And by the way, the Baptism by John the Baptist in Jordan is not the same as Baptism in the Name of the Trinity.

The Gospel appointed for today picks up with John the Baptist in prison. Even though John was a favorite of King Herod, it did not stop him from being thrown into prison for calling out King Herod's sin of adultery and an unlawful marriage. And despite being imprisoned, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus a kind of riddle, *art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* They ask Jesus if He is the promised Messiah. And Jesus answers him not with a riddle, but evidence, *Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind*

receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.

John likely did not witness any of the miracles of Jesus first hand because he was imprisoned. The forerunner of Jesus, even if he was doubtful as to whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, would have to be content with hearing his miracles and wonders second hand. Jesus uses the moment though to address the mistaken expectations of the Messiah. What did they expect the Messiah to be like? Most, including Jesus' own disciples, expected a military general to overthrow Rome's grip on Israel. The disciples of John the Baptist likely expected a violent judge. Then Jesus in effect turns to the multitudes and asks them of their expectations, *what went you out to see? John was no ordinary man, you went out to see a show, to see miracles and wonders. John the Baptist was not shaken by winds of favor, he was no sycophant or comfort seeker. They that wear soft clothing are in king's palaces and yet John is in the dungeon of a palace and cannot see what you see, and yet he believes. You went out to hear John and to be baptized by him, you thought he was a prophet, and I say unto you he is the fulfillment of the prophets.*

Jesus lavished praise upon John the Baptist, for even if he was mistaken in his expectations of the Messiah, he was still the crown and glory of the Old Testament prophets, and the messenger of heaven. The message of heaven, which calls us all to be stewards of the mysteries of God, is the only way to turn *the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just*. But first, just as at this time of year we may be asked *what we really want for Christmas?* We must ask ourselves what are our expectations for the Messiah? What do we expect Jesus to be like? What are our expectations for heaven? Are our expectations informed by the world or by the Gospel? If we step back and examine these expectations we find that they are intertwined with how we live out our faith. The reality is that the message of heaven is one of joy. Rejoice! The way to heaven has been opened for us, blinded eyes are given sight, the lame walk, the poor have the Gospel preached to them, sinners are made saints, and heaven itself has come near, and draws closer this very morning.

*But more than Prophet, more
Than Angels can adore
With face unveiled, is He they go to seek;
Blessèd be God, Whose grace
Shows Him in every place
To homeliest hearts of pilgrims pure and meek.*