

Go Forth...

A SERVICE OF U.S. CATHOLIC MISSION ASSOCIATION

MISSIONARY COMMENTARY

THE BAPTIST'S MISSION



SUNDAY READINGS:

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

Psalms 146:7-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

ANNOUNCING OUR SAVIOR'S ARRIVAL

As Christians we are called to be proclaimers, heralds, and evangelizers. An excellent model for us is none other than John the Baptist. During this Advent season, an exploration into the significance of John's witness can renew our dedication to persevere as evangelizers. Five aspects of John's life capture our attention and reflection.

Receiving God's Call. Saint Luke relates the story of John's birth: an announcement is made by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah; the news appears unbelievable since Zechariah and Elizabeth are elderly and childless. The unborn infant leaps in Elizabeth's womb when her cousin Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visits; the child receives the divinely chosen name John ("Yahweh is gracious"). John, like every baptized Christian, receives the vocation to herald God's Word.

Godly Life-style. Recorded by all synoptic gospels, John next appears in the desert of Judah (Mt 3:1-12; Mk 1:4-8; Lk 3:1-9). Along with his announcement of the kingdom, John practices an exemplary life-style. He dressed in a manner reminiscent of Elijah and practiced a prophetic way of life. He fasts, prays, and practices penance. If one wishes to inspire people and attract them to Jesus, one begins by examining—and probably changing—one's life-style.

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Doubts and Darkness. John the Baptist consistently remained faithful to his God-given vocation and an exemplary life-style. Yet, none of us know the extent of the temptations that bombarded his soul. What fear did he face when he rebuked the tetrarch Herod Antipas for his adulterous and incestuous marriage with Herodias? John was not spared the trials and temptations of the courageous disciple, one who heralds the Messiah.

Privileged Precursor. The Baptist faced a challenging vocation, an austere life-style, and disturbing doubts. Considering all the challenges and demands, was it worth the sacrifice? We hear John respond: Certainly! Absolutely! It is a great, unique privilege to prepare the pathway of the Messiah. Listen to the Baptist's own words: "Behold the Lamb of God.... One is coming after me who ranks before me" (Jn 1:29-30). "I myself am not the Christ" (Jn 3:28). Thus, in everything, "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

Faithful Witness. The Baptist lived his commitment radically and with finality. Jesus said that "history has not known a man born of woman greater than John" (cf. Mt 11:11; Lk 7:28). As a true prophet, he ultimately bore witness through a martyr's death. John was executed as a result of a foolish pledge made by Herod during a drunken orgy (Mt 14:1-12; Mk 6:14-29; Lk 9:7-9).

Conclusion. The Church's liturgy captures the Advent mission of the Baptist in the Preface designated for his feast; it can also serve as a paradigm for our Christian witnessing: "You set John the Baptist apart from others, marking him out with special favor.... You chose John the Baptist.... to show the world its redeemer, the Lamb of Sacrifice.... You found John worthy of a martyr's death, his last and greatest act of witness to you Son." Advent blessings to all!

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NOTES ON THE SUNDAY READINGS:

First Reading - Isaiah 35:1-6, 10: The marvelously talented prophet Isaiah manifests his poetic skills in today's passage which pictures the future return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity. The desert will bloom just like the luxuriant seacoast of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon. The people will be made strong as God comes to rescue them.

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 146:7-10: This psalm describes God's magnificent saving action. He secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, protects strangers, and sustains the fatherless and the widow. Knowing our compassionate God, we can fervently pray: "Lord, come and save us."

Second Reading - James 5:7-10: Today's second reading comes from the letter of Saint James. In his blunt and practical style, he gives us an important Advent lesson. James tells us to be patient, like the wise farmer who waits the maturing of his crop. Our hope will not be disappointed, because the coming of the Lord is close at hand.

Gospel - Matthew 11:2-11: Our Gospel today from Matthew, our Advent guide, tells us of John the Baptizer pointing to Jesus as the one who is to come. We note that John in prison has his questions, so he sends his disciples to inquire if Jesus was indeed the expected messiah. Jesus simply responds by telling John's disciples to report what they see. Jesus' compassionate works verify that he indeed is the promised messiah.

Notes and Commentary by Maryknoller James H. Kroeger, who has recently published *Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language* (Orbis Books) as well as *Exploring Vatican II Treasures: Actors, Events, Insights* and *A Joyful Journey with Pope Francis* (Faith Alive Books).

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