

Yesterday, I found myself at one of the many holiday markets that spring up in Washington DC every Christmas. I found myself faced with a long line for what my girlfriend assured me would be the best hot chocolate in DC. So good sport that I am, I waited in line, hands shoved deep into my pockets against the cold that was biting my cheeks and ears. I waited.

And waited. And waited.

(Apparently this act of heroism won me some Instagram fame as ‘guy who waited over an hour in line for something he didn’t care about.’)

After an hour spent patiently in line, I reached the hot chocolate window. The man inside the truck looked me straight in the eye and snarled:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

OK, so he didn’t actually say that. What he actually said was, “What’ll it be?”

But I imagine that an experience like that must have been what it felt like to journey out to the River Jordan in search of a religious experience only to be met by a fiery prophet raging on about judgement and the wrath to come. Amidst all the serene Advent songs and premature Christmas decorations, John the Baptist’s words come at us like an unexpected blow to the head. If we’re honest, that dire voice in the wilderness doesn’t really seem to fit in how we’d like the holiday season to feel.

And I get it. You don’t want to hear warnings about the Wrath to Come when we’re just over a week shy of Christmas Eve. You all don’t want to hear about judgement and repentance, one more burden to top off all that stress over gift purchases and meal preparations and travel plans. But bear with me and listen to John. Because there’s no getting to that Silent Night and the sweet baby in the Bethlehem manger without first getting through the wild man standing on the banks of the Jordan, preaching his fiery sermons on judgement and repentance.

There’s that sweet, innocent baby in the manger, surrounded by sheep and donkeys and Wise Men... and then there’s his cousin, that voice crying out in the wilderness, baptizing with water and calling for repentance. John is an odd figure in our Advent panoply. With his camel’s hair clothes and wild, unkempt hair and urgent calls to repentance John is probably the least marketable figures in the Christmas lineup.

(John, I think, likes it this way.)

Oh, we try. We Christians are an industrious bunch, and there are few Biblical images—from Noah’s Ark to slavery in Egypt to the Crucifixion—that we can’t pretty up and slap on the cover of a children’s picture book. I’ve seen my share of Sunday School Johns – with a

neat camel-hair vest and slightly tousled hair and beard, smiling cheerily as he dips someone in the water.

But John bar Zechariah was nothing like that. If we saw this fiery waterside preacher today we would probably think he was unhinged. We might even hurry to cross the road on the other side, like we so often do with the street preachers we encounter on city corners. He was a wild outlier even in his own day, a strange novelty.

For the people of Judea, oppressed and occupied and hungry for the restoration of God's kingdom, he must have seemed like a figure straight out of scripture, a legendary prophet in the mold of Elijah or Samson or Samuel. And when they heard that this man was preaching the coming of God's kingdom their ears pricked up and they rushed to the banks of the Jordan to see it for themselves.

Surely, this time, their hopes would be fulfilled! Surely here was a new Samuel, here to anoint a new King David to cast down King Herod, to drive out the hated Romans and usher in the national restoration they so hoped for!

What they got was something else entirely. "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" Jesus mocks the crowds later in Luke's Gospel. "A reed shaken in the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes?" Like so many of God's messengers, John did not come into the world to tell people what they wanted to hear. And like so many of God's messengers, the people rationalized their rejection of John by insisting that he was a crank, a madman, someone possessed by an evil spirit.

We cannot judge them too harshly. After all, how often do we dismiss a message we don't want to hear just because it does not come wrapped in our preferred packaging?

The crowds hoped John had come to preach the coming of the Davidic Messiah, the warrior king to lead an armed revolt and restore the Kingdom of Israel to past glories. And given the circumstances, who can blame them? But this was also a message that demanded very little of its listeners. Keep the faith and eventually the promised Messiah will swoop in, a Great Man on a white horse, and solve all of your problems through violent, cathartic revolution.

And a religious call that demands nothing of its listener is no call at all. John knew that well. Jesus knew this also. The message of God is meant to stir our hearts into action, not leave us waiting passively on the sidelines.

John was indeed God's messenger, the King's Herald proclaiming the coming kingdom. But this was like no kingdom the crowds could think of, a kingdom that called for an awakening

of moral virtue, for great acts of charity to become commonplace and reflexive. The coming of the kingdom is not a great political movement but a moral awakening.

John could have been satisfied with the great turnout his ministry produced. All of Jerusalem was coming out for the novelty of this experience, for the thrill of John's message and the excitement of immersion in the Jordan. This mass turnout is any preacher's dream! But to John, numbers meant nothing. The strength of his mission was measured in his ability to change people's hearts and to prepare the nation for its coming encounter with Christ.

For John, repentance has less to do with how fervently we pray or how faithfully we attend worship services. Instead, repentance has everything to do with how we handle riches, perform public service, and exercise stewardship over communities and creation. This repentance calls for a mental and spiritual reversal, one that enables us to set aside self-centeredness and bear fruits of generosity, unselfishness, and justice.

Our lives are a constant movement of repentance and preparation. Every day, every week, every month, every year—we spend our lives experiencing John's call to prepare the way of the Lord. Through worship and scripture and life in community God turns our hearts towards the love that is the lifeblood of the heavenly kingdom. John's proclamation makes it clear: we are called not to be passive members of the kingdom, bystanders perched on the tree's branches, but trees ourselves, trees bearing good fruit worthy of God.

Christ is the gardener, gently watering us, fertilizing our soil, and pruning our branches when we go astray. John's fierce message may be urgent, but it is that urgency that sets our hearts aflame with the love of God. It is that urgency that gives us the strength to persevere even when times seem bleak or difficult. And it is that fierce urgency that carries us forward through Advent, on to that coming scene at the stable, where the promised King comes into the world.