

**2nd Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2009
10 am Liturgy**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

Every year, toward the middle of Advent, the church re-introduces us to one of the most enigmatic, puzzling characters in the New Testament. His name is John, the Baptist. There are different accounts of John in the gospels, with different emphases and different details that are sometimes hard to reconcile. But no matter how we try to paint a more historically accurate picture, John remains enigmatic: a strange and yet powerful figure who is proclaimed himself as the last of the great prophets of Israel and the first of the great seers and heralds of God's New Covenant.

In Luke's version, John is announced with great formality and almost regal trappings. In the custom of the time, Luke carefully describes all the civic and religious leaders of Israel. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee..., during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...." Notice how Luke brilliantly introduces the cast of characters who we will see and hear again as the gospel story unfolds. All the readers of Luke's gospel—including ourselves today—know the end of the story. We know the part Herod will play in John's own death; we know when Pilate's next entrance will come

in the Praetorium; we know how Annas and Caiaphas will rend their garments and accuse Jesus of blasphemy. And we know that Caesar is no longer Lord. Jesus, the Christ, is Lord.

For the Word of God is coming through. And the Word of God comes not to any of these obviously important people. The Word of God comes from John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert. And John sees what is coming. John knows intuitively that he must prepare the way. And so he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The word Luke uses here for repentance is *metanoia*, a Greek word that literally means “beyond the mind.” John knows that the mind traps us—all of us—into our own narrow webs of what we *think* we understand. John knows that we can never think our way to Christmas. We can never think our way to Easter. We can never think our way to forgiveness. We need to “go beyond” our minds. And listen. Watch. Be still...and know God’s love.

John’s voice in the wilderness might have been thrilled to sing one of Mary Oliver’s recent poems called “Praying.” She says: “...this isn’t a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.”

“One greater than I is coming. I am not worthy to unloose his sandals.” Listen. Watch. Re-pent and go beyond your minds. Have you ever listened to

the birds just before sunrise. I can never do that living on the front side of our Beacon Street home. But I can when I visit the Cape. And I am continually amazed—and sometimes annoyed—at the loud singing in the dark, when I should still be sleeping peacefully. John is the bird who begins singing long before the sun rises. He is the bird who *feels* the light and sings while it is yet dark (Rabi Tagore).

Despite his often craggy appearance in art (like on today's church Bulletin), and despite his appalling grasshopper diet and strange attire, John is the most gentle and intuitive of souls. He must have been to hear the rustling of the Spirit's wings by the Jordan. He may have lived in the desert and lived on the edge of the world, but this edgy man could go beyond his mind to feel God's breath.

John knew what Henri Nouwen distilled in more contemporary words. "Jesus' whole message is to say that you are God's beloved child....When you can hear in your heart, not in your head, that you are truly God's beloved daughter, that you are truly God's beloved son, everything turns around. The mystery of this spiritual truth is that you were loved before you were born, and you will be loved after you die....Your dwelling in God's heart is a dwelling from eternity to eternity ("Discovering our Gift Through Service to Others").

Everything turns around, Nouwen says. Everything turns around, John says. When you can go beyond your mind's webs and let yourself be embraced by God's infinite love for you. That is what Incarnation really means. That is what Advent is about.

Stop thinking. And watch. Look. See. Listen. Emmanuel is still with us—here and there. In Afghanistan and in Iraq. In Roxbury and in Provincetown. In darkness and in light. In sorrow and in joy. In all of life—even through death. Listen to the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and make straight the way for our God in your heart.