

**Second Sunday of Advent  
December 5, 2010  
4 PM and 8 AM Liturgies**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**We are introduced today to one of the great characters of Advent, John the Baptizer. I've said this before, but for a long time I've wanted to give John a Christmas present. (He's probably never received one, you know. Just bad timing.) My present would be a tee-shirt that I saw I while back in a shop window in Provincetown. It has a big picture of a globe on it, our world, and it says underneath: "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space." That, it seems to me, captures exactly what John the Baptist has always been about—and still is.**

**Notice his introduction in Matthew's gospel has his very first words addressed to the religious authorities of his time and place. He shouts at them: "You brood of vipers!" Nothing subtle there!**

**John stands in stark contrast to the sentiment of this season. Most of us know that the sentiment of this season can be overwhelmingly soft and warm and fuzzy. It is a time of nice smells, and heart-felt music, and gentle images of softly falling snow and cute mangers complete with angels and shepherds and even cuddly animals. (Of course I'm ignoring what shopping is like these days. We'll just ignore that for the time being.)**

Many of us keep saying to each other: “It’s a wonderful life,” as if Jimmy Stewart were about to pop in any minute or any little bell would signal another angel’s wings secured.

In spiritual terms, this season is most often painted in soft pastels. Some are anticipating a little baby about to be born again. Some sing of a time of universal justice and peace for all. Some, like Isaiah in today’s first reading, sing so beautifully and convincingly of a coming reign of gentleness where the lion will lie down with the kid, and the wolf will live with the lamb. Isaiah paints in pastels too when tells us again today that the time is coming soon when God’s holy mountain will contain a civilization wherein there will be no harm or destruction for any, and where all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

It is beautiful poetry and a very touching dream. But I wonder how the dream plays in Afghanistan, or Haiti, or Iraq, or on the Korean peninsula these days? Or, for that matter, I wonder how it really plays in Chestnut Hill, or Newton, or Braintree, or Boston? In my line of work I hear people asking quite a lot these days: *where is that world?* *Where is that mountain?* *Where is the Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street really alive today?* *Where is the reign of justice?* *Why do so few of us realize those dreams?* John the

**Baptizer offers a hint.**

**John the Baptizer stands as the antidote to all spiritual melodrama. John is the antithesis of anything soft, warm, gooey, or sentimental in the holiday season. There is nothing whatsoever pastel about John; he is all primary colors!**

**John is as strange as they come. His camel's hair is not from Bloomingdale's, nor is his leather belt from Coach. His dietary habits sound appalling and he is most often pictured as grossly unkempt. In short, this is not the kind of man most of us would invite into a parish book club meeting, or to a lovely holiday dinner party! He is one strange dude—and everybody seems to know it. Can you still see his tee-shirt? "If you are not living on the edge, you are taking up too much space." That's says: John!**

**Yet for his friend and cousin, Jesus, John is the one who epitomizes the coming kingdom and reign of God. John represents the harsh reality of that reign here on earth. John's whole life prefigures that the kingdom of God, the coming reign of justice and peace. But for John the coming of that kingdom remains hard work and is definitely not for the faint-hearted or soft souled. Advent is not a passive time but an invitation to realize the signs of the kingdom in our own lives.**

**Jesus himself seems to know what the real signs of his arrival among us are. And those signs do not include a cuddly baby, softly falling snow, and herald angels singing in the brightly lit heavens. As we will hear from Isaiah again next week, the real signs of God's coming among us are clear to Jesus: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them. That is Jesus' mandate from the Father. That is the kingdom we are invited to share—but very concretely in our own lives, here and now.**

**I know this time of the year most of us need a rest. Can't we just take a break and enjoy the gentle sounds and sights of the season. We'll just "wait" quietly this year. The Light coming into the world will shine gently this time—maybe. It's a hope anyway.**

**But today's liturgy is a stark reminder that the Christmas we wait for is an invitation not just to enjoy the lights of the season, but to actively dispel the darkness—there *is* a difference! The invitation is to actively dispel the darkness wherever we find it in our own hearts and in our own worlds. So, maybe John says to *us* today: spend more time on the edge of your world, and know the real meaning of that for which we all still wait.**