

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

John the Baptizer is everything we don't want to be.

He is everything we go out of our way not to be.

He's ugly, frail, weak, scrawny, smelly, malnourished, and stubborn.

He's self-less, humble, bold, defiant, unwavering, and confessional.

St. John the Baptizer is the sort of person we wouldn't be friends with.

We'd avoid any conversation with him, as much as possible.

And we certainly wouldn't invite him over for dinner—
he wouldn't come anyhow!

As repulsive as St. John the Baptizer is to us,

he is the image of Advent,

he is the prophet, the angel of God, the messenger, the voice!

He is the one sent to *Prepare the way of the Lord,*
and to *make His paths straight.*

St. John the Baptizer is the last prophet,
that is, the last prophet until Christ.

St. John the Baptizer is the bridge between the Old and New Testaments,

He is the voice Isaiah heard in his vision long ago,

He's the voice that cried out to the suffering and the destitute, the broken and the
despairing—

St. John the Baptizer is the voice that cries,

Comfort, Comfort, ye My people! (Isa 40:1).

St. John speaks tenderly to Jerusalem;

St. John comforts, bestows mercy, and offers the pardon for their sin by,
what must have been a strange thing,

a baptism of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Mk 1:4).

But St. John also comes with all sorts of rough edges.

He's out in the wilderness.

No one wants to go back to the wilderness!

The wilderness is the place of wandering:

40 years without house or home,

40 years without land and crop and cattle,

40 years without home cooked meals, with sickness, complaining,
grumbling and snakes!

No one wants to go back to the wilderness!

That's where they've come *from,*

into the promised land, the land of milk and honey.

But not John—

John's out in the wilderness,
dressed in camel's hair,
wearing a leather hide as a belt,
eating locusts (the food of the plagues!)—

John stands in the wilderness and calls Israel back out, back to the way of *repentance*!

And this call, this preaching and baptizing, this is how the Lord's way is prepared.

And St. John the Baptizer calls to us today as well.

“The way of the Lord must be prepared within our hearts.”¹

Now our hearts aren't as pure and nice as we try to make them seem.

Just a few chapters later in Mark's Gospel Jesus will tell you what comes from the heart:

“out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness” (Mk 7:21-22).

Our hearts are where our passions lie.

It's in our heart that we lust—after other women, power, prestige, honor, and wealth.

It's in our heart that our passions are misguided, our emotions deceptive—

it's from the heart we become angry and enraged.

And from the heart, we speak.

So it's no use simply trying to tame our language—

we must deal with the heart.

“The way of the Lord must be prepared within our hearts.”

And that's what John is here for.

That's what Advent is all about.

John is the voice that cries for repentance—

for a *broken and contrite heart*.

John calls us, along with *all Judea and all Jerusalem* (Mk 1:5), to come out to the wilderness—

He calls us to *repent*.

And that's what Advent is all about—

preparing for the coming Savior by confessing who we are,

and how ugly our hearts actually are.

That's why we don't like John and wouldn't have him over for dinner.

He tells it like it is.

He somehow is able to peer into our hearts and call a sin a sin.

He sees our hatred and envy our lust and covetousness.

He sees our misery and our hurting and our anguish.

¹ Origen, *Homilies on Luke 21.5.7*; PG 13:1856.

And if we had our way without John, we'd keep all of that nicely locked up where no one could see it and no would could call us out for it.

But thanks be to God that He sent John the Baptizer!
Thanks be to God that He continues to speak His word that pierces our hearts,
that draws us to repentance.

And with repentance, Baptism. With Baptism, forgiveness.

And the sort of forgiveness we receive is exactly the Comfort Isaiah proclaims.

Comfort in Isaiah isn't a lazy-boy or a spa—
its mercy, forgiveness, life when all our heart deserves is death.

As we learn to repent, as we learn to confess our sins,
to speak the horrible realities of what lie in our hearts, deep, dark, and hidden,
then we also will learn to trust this Jesus—
the one who comes after John,
mightier than John,
whose strap of a sandal John isn't worthy or sufficient to stoop down and untie.

And it is this Jesus alone who is able to create new and clean and pure hearts out of our filthy and sinful hearts.

It's this Jesus, who shed His blood on the cross for us, for our broken hearts, to make us whole.

And it's this Jesus who sends His Holy Spirit, the *Comforter*, the one who brings mercy to us.

He is coming, He comes to you, He comes to your heart, cleans it up, brings you to repentance,
and then makes that heart His home.

That's the preaching and baptizing of John and that's what comes to you today!

Jesus said, "Among those born of women there is none greater than John" (Lk 7:28).

And it's certainly not because of anything in John that makes him great—
remember he was ugly, selfless, smelly, humble, stubborn, bold, and uncompromising.

What made John great was that he trusted in nothing else, and proclaimed nothing other than,
Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world.

He spoke of a Jesus who re-directs our passions,
who re-forms our hearts,
who dies and rises for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit