

On this second Sunday of our Advent journey, we hear the God's word in the prophecy of Isaiah. In Christian understanding, this prophecy was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. Long ago, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, God announced his intentions through the work of Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet. God said, "I will send my messenger ahead of the Lord, and he will prepare the way of the Lord. His voice will be the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Most of us are familiar with the message, for it was the central theme of the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophet God sent to set the stage for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the savior of the world

The Evangelist Mark, whose account of John the Baptist we read this morning, tells us that John was a strange character. Mark is very brief and to the point. The other Gospel accounts give us a lot more detail. But, by anybody's account, John the Baptist clearly was one of the oddest characters in all of history. He lived in the wilderness. He dressed in camel skins. He lived on locusts and wild honey. His appearance would scare almost anyone. John was probably an Essene, an adherent of an extremist religious sect. Today we would scorn him as something of a nut, a religious freak, or worse – a religious radical, the kind that stir up the people to overturn the established order.

John had something to say to the world, and no one nor anything was going to stop him. He didn't care what he looked like. He didn't care what people thought about him. All he cared about was proclaiming the kingdom of God. John was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he believed himself the chosen messenger of God, chosen to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah. John had a message to proclaim and the message was that redemption was at hand. God was about to act in history, in a way that humanity had never experienced. God was on the verge of taking the form of man. The Messiah was coming. John's job was to get people ready.

The gospels tell us that even though John was an unlikely messenger, he was the right candidate because he was God's candidate. AS God's spokesman, he could be nothing but a success, and a success he was. Thousands poured out of the towns and villages and traveled to the banks of the Jordan River to hear John preach. "Repent," John said. "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. The Messiah is coming. Make a straight pathway for the lord." Hundreds of those who came to the river accepted John's message and were baptized as a symbol of their repentance. John laid the pathway for Jesus, even as he told the crowds that he was not the messiah. The messiah was coming, John said. He would be with them, soon.

How would we receive John today? Would we hear him? Would we acknowledge our need for Jesus? Would we do what is necessary to prepare for the coming of the messiah? Through the pages of the Mark's Gospel, John's message to us is the same one he proclaimed in the days of old. If we are to know the Savior, if we are to welcome him into our lives and be transformed by him so that we are included in the family of God, we must prepare the way for the Lord in our hearts and in our minds. Above all else, Advent is the time for getting ready to meet Jesus. Advent is a time for cleaning spiritual house, a time for ridding the soul of the accumulated

spiritual trash, called sin and doubt. It is a time for making oneself a castle fit to receive the King. It is a time to get ready for Jesus. *Amen.*