

Like John the Baptist

This morning's gospel reading describes the first appearance of John the Baptist. And his appearance, at that specific time and place in the history of Israel, has been likened to "the sudden sounding of the voice of God." And the reason was the fact that, at that time in their life, the Jews were only too conscious of the fact that, for four hundred years, there had been no prophet for Israel. Throughout four long centuries, the voice of prophecy had been silent and, as they put it themselves, "there was no voice, nor any that answered." But, in John, the prophetic voice spoke again.

What do we know about John? Not a lot, really. Scripture and tradition tell us that, as a cousin of Jesus, and born into a priestly family, John spent much of his formative years in the desert solitude, perhaps as a member of an ascetic religious community. Believing himself to be a type of "latter-day Elijah," whose ministry would prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah, John, therefore, and perhaps intentionally, imitated the habits and dress of Elijah. His call to formal ministry came at the age of 30. To a nation only too aware of the immense gulf between the ideal form of faithful living they had been taught from God, and the reality of the situation at hand in society, they were ready to hear the voice of John. And the substance of his message was simply this: "Repent."

The early Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, described John in this manner: that he was "a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God." (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII.5.2) Now I'd like to take a few minutes, this morning, to explore the characteristics of John and his message, because I believe that there are some similarities between twenty-first century America and first-century Palestine, and so what John has to say to them may have some bearing on us as well.

Perhaps *the most predominant characteristic of John* was that he denounced evil wherever he found it. If Herod, the Jewish king, sinned by entering into an unlawful marriage to his sister-in-law, John rebuked it. If the Sadducees and Pharisees, the religious standard-bearers of their day, were stuck in ritualistic formalism, making their religion too difficult for the average person to understand, John never hesitated to say so. And if he witnessed ordinary men and women living lives which were unresponsive to the call of God, John would tell them. Wherever John saw that which he thought was contrary to the will and purpose of God – whether in the state, or in the Church, or among the people – he fearlessly rebuked it. He was like a light which dared to light up the dark places; like a wind, sweeping from God, throughout the country.

I believe there have been times when the Church was too polite, too careful, and avoided confronting the powers that be. I know that is true for me. There have been many times in my ministry, when gentle confrontation or correction would have been entirely appropriate, and even advisable, but instead I held my tongue for fear of offending or embarrassing someone. Too

many times I have not stood up for what I knew was right, because I didn't want to get involved in a dispute. I would not, I think, make a good prophet – at least not one like John the Baptist. Maybe you feel the same way about yourselves.

Another characteristic of John was that he urgently called people to live lives of moral and ethical uprightness. His message was not exclusively one of denouncing wrong beliefs or actions whenever he encountered them. John also called people to do that which they ought to do – using his own words: to bear fruit worthy of a converted life. And he didn't speak in generalities. To those who had plenty of food and clothing, he encouraged them to share with those who didn't. To the tax collectors, he admonished them to collect no more than the amount prescribed – since tax fraud was rampant then. And to the soldiers, he encouraged them not to use their position and power to extort money from the people. And so, he not only brought light to personal deficits, but he also challenged and encouraged people to do better. In some ways, John was like a coach, who encourages and challenges his players to new heights and loftier goals.

I believe that there have been times when the Church was too preoccupied in telling people what not to do, that it forgot to educate people about what they should do. It is very easy to be critical and destructive, but it's much harder to be directive and constructive. But, to teach by example, and to remind others of the ideals we should live by, and to encourage others to try again and try harder, are the very things we need to be about. I know that, in the eighteen years that Peggy and I have been parents, that we are at our best when the correction of our children includes not only instruction about what our kids should not be doing, but also an explanation of what they should be doing instead. And I've learned that it accomplishes very little to criticize anyone, if I don't offer to guide them as well.

A third characteristic of John was that he was a man of prayer. He came out of the desert religious tradition, which sought after God in solitude. John did what he did only after he had been prepared by time spent with God. Therefore, when John speaks, the message is not one of his own creation, but a message from God. Before he did anything, whether in word or in deed, John had spent time alone with God.

I think that all of us would do well to imitate this aspect of John's character. Any time we feel the need to correct or admonish, to inform or encourage – before we can do any of this – we must first spend some time in the presence of God, talking to him with prayer, and listening to him through meditation.

A fourth, and final, characteristic of John was that, in all his words and actions, he pointed beyond himself. Despite the many things that John was to many people, I believe he saw himself as a signpost to God. It was not himself he wished people to see; he didn't seek attention or popularity; he didn't look for followers or admirers – he simply wanted to help people find their relationship with God.

This then, should be, I believe, the goal of every Christian's life: to be something like those old-time hurricane lanterns. Within us is contained the fire of the Spirit, the light of Christ. But we ourselves are, essentially, transparent. When people see us, hopefully what they will see is that which is the goal and purpose of our lives – the light and life of God. It's as one writer described it: "the true messenger of God is ultimately obliterated in his message."

Even after more than four hundred years of prophetic poverty, the people of Israel recognized John the Baptist as a prophet. And why was that? Because he came to offer a light to illumine the dark places of our lives. Because he came as a voice full of encouragement and direction. Because he came as a signpost to point us in the direction of God. And, because he came with the sort of authoritative manner which seems to describe the man or woman who "comes into the presence of men out of the presence of God."

In this season of Advent, we are reminded that, just as God called John the Baptist to a ministry of hope and reconciliation, so too, God call us. Amen.