

## MIDWEEK ADVENT I

### Matthew 3:1-12

*“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”*

St. John the Baptist is perhaps one of the most interesting men in all of Holy Scripture. From his conception heralded by an angel to his death, when his head was cut off and served on a platter for having criticized the sin of the king, his life was never less than unique.

St. Luke tells us about John’s family in the first chapter of his Gospel:

***In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.***

John, like Isaac, like Samuel, was a miraculous child, born when God opened the womb of his mother and in her old age and to her great joy gave her a little one who would be nothing short of great when he grew up. The Angel Gabriel told Zechariah as much as he was ministering in the Temple, that this child would be instrumental in the culmination of God’s plan of salvation, also in Luke 1:

***“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”***

Notice that just at the Lord gave John to Elizabeth and Zechariah, so also he gave them John’s name as well. John means “the Lord is gracious,” and John would preach just that, urging people to repentance, to confess their sins and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lamb of God who was actually also his cousin, as his mother was Mary’s cousin. Imagine that, having the Messiah as your cousin. You might call that interesting.

As if John’s birth wasn’t strange enough, however, his life didn’t get any less out-of-the-ordinary. When we next meet him, what do we hear at the beginning of our lesson? ***“Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”***

Let’s start with the eating locusts and wild honey part. What do you think, sound good for our next potluck? Who wants the first locust? Why locusts and honey? Well, in the first place, both were acceptable under the Old Testament dietary laws. In the wilderness, where there wasn’t a whole lot to eat and Meijer was a long drive away, and camels don’t get good gas mileage. Yet, even in the harsh conditions of the wilderness, where food was scarce and beggars couldn’t be choosers, John still made sure to keep God’s laws for what Israel could eat. He was a faithful Jew, which was important, because he was the final prophet to proclaim the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Jews, that the Savior to come from their line and nation had been born and was about to begin His ministry. Locusts also fit the theme of his preaching. He preached a simple message of repentance, and so he avoided any pomp or pretense in his daily life. The honey was also acceptable under the Old Testament law and, interestingly enough, calls to mind the history of Israel, who after the plagues, one of which included locusts, was called out of Egypt and into the wilderness on its way to the Promised Land, a land our Lord described as a land flowing with milk and honey.

And then there's the camel's hair garment and leather belt. Many bible scholars think Elijah dressed similarly, especially because of a reference to that prophet in 2 Kings 1:8 as a hairy man, which can be understood as a man in a hair garment, with a leather belt around his waist. It would be fitting for John, the new Elijah, as Jesus called him, to dress like the first Elijah, the great prophet and fiery preacher who also called out even the mighty for their sins, even kings, as he lived an austere life in the wilderness. Either way, John's appearance was memorable. Some of you might still not remember what all my vestments are called, but I bet you'd never forget if I were to come out in a camel's hair garment and a leather belt. Because St. John's appearance and lifestyle was a striking one, it no doubt stoked people's curiosity, and led not a few to go out into the wilderness to see him, some who, Scriptures tells us, thanks be to God, heard his message, the Lord's message, and were saved, having been pointed to the Messiah, Jesus, the Lamb of God, the final and all-atoning sacrifice for sin.

And that brings us to the most important part of our consideration of St. John the Baptist: his message. Listen to John preach today. I know, he's a bit blunt, and not necessarily polished in his eloquence, but give him your ear.

***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*”**

Advent is about repentance and about looking to the Christ, the one mightier than John. We do well, then, especially in this season, to take John's message to heart, and to ***“bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”*** Where has your Christian walk necessitated repentance? Receive Christ's forgiveness, but also strive to bear fruit in that area of your life through the new life Christ grants. Have you been unfaithful in school? Serve God through your studies. Have you given less than your best in the workplace? Serve God through your labor. Have you failed to love your spouse with the love and forgiveness of Christ? Serve God in your marriage. Have you not honored, respected, and obeyed your parents, or as a parent have you been overbearing and harsh with your children? Serve God in your family. Have you been negligent in studying God's Word or participating in the sacramental life of the church? Serve God in your parish. Have you taken your possessions for granted or failed to use them in a biblical and loving manner? Serve God with your property. Have you been a poor citizen, taking without giving from your fellow citizens, or failing to educate yourself to be a responsible voice in our democracy? Serve God in your nation.

***“Behold,”*** John calls out in John 1, ***“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** ***Be baptized,*** John urges, ***for the forgiveness of your sins,*** or if baptized, return to your Baptism for the same forgiveness anew. And don't stop there. No, John says, also ***“bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”*** Let the fruit of your repentance match with the harm done by your sin, making amends, so far as you are able.

Jesus is coming. That is the message of Advent. He is coming on Christmas morn, and he is coming with His Word, and He will come again. Get ready, John calls. Get ready. The Lamb is on His way. Receive Him. Let His blood mark the doorposts of your hearts to keep death and hell at bay, and let His way be your way as you as a pilgrim walk the path to heaven. Amen.