

John the Baptist. Now when I was a kid growing up in these parts, I used to think that John was a member of the Baptist Church. Jim the Episcopalian. Bob the Methodist. John the Baptist. So, perhaps a better English translation for us is not John the Baptist, but John, the one who baptizes, or John the Baptizer.

Orthodox Christians use a different title for John: John the Forerunner. This is also a great name for John. John the Forerunner. John, the one who comes before.

In 1990, Renee and I attended a live taping of the Tonight show. We were waiting outside in line. We then waited some more in the theater. We were told that Johnny Carson would walk out on stage at 5:30. But before Johnny came out, Doc Severinsen came out to warm up the crowd. After that, Ed McMahon came out to warm up the crowd some more. Their job was to get us loosened up and laughing before the star came out with the words, "Here's Johnny."

For Jesus, John the Baptizer is the warmup act. John is the advance man. John comes to soften the beachhead. John the Forerunner comes to prepare the way.

In scripture, the role of St. John the Baptist is crystal clear. John comes to testify. John comes to bear witness. John prepares for Jesus by pointing away from himself, and pointing towards Jesus.

In fact, in classic Christian art, it's usually fairly easy to identify John the Baptizer. First, he's usually wearing clothing that looks like animal skins. Second, he's usually pointing away from himself. He's either pointing toward Jesus, or pointing toward a Lamb, the Lamb of God, the title John the Baptist uses for Jesus in the Gospel According to John. And you often see an inscription with his statement, *Ecce Agnus Dei*, "Behold the Lamb of God."¹ That's the role of John the Baptist, to point us away from himself, and to point us toward Jesus.

In doing this, John the Forerunner is wonderful example of humility. John has every opportunity to grab the limelight. John has every opportunity to focus attention on himself. John the Baptizer has every opportunity to show off. But he doesn't. Instead, he continually points toward Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, the priests and Levites have come to John the Baptist. John is one of their own. He's the son of a priest which makes him a priest. So these priests are coming to check up on John. They're like the ethics committee of the AMA or the Bar Association following up on one of their own. John is attracting very large crowds. So these religious leaders are coming to make sure that John is kosher, that John is not giving their group a black eye.

They ask John the Baptizer a series of questions. With any one of these questions, John could take the glory. Each of these questions gives John the Forerunner the perfect opportunity to say, 'Hey, I'm something special. Look at how wonderful I am. You should really pay attention to me.'

¹ John 1:29

But in answer to each question, John points away from himself, and he points toward Jesus.

Their first question right off the bat is, "Who are you?" John's reply is, "I am not the Messiah." This is a rather strange answer. They never asked him if he was the Messiah. It would be like someone asking you, "Who are you?" and you answer, "I'm not the Archbishop of Canterbury." What? That's kind of a non-sequitur.

But it's a non-sequitur with a purpose. There's more to John's answer than just a denial. John is putting the idea of the Messiah right out there on the table. He puts the idea of messiahship right into play. Also, in the Greek, John puts an emphasis on the word "I." He says, "I am not the Messiah," which implies, 'I'm not the Messiah, but the Messiah is near.' John the Forerunner takes the focus from himself, and points toward Jesus. He redirects the focus toward the coming Messiah.

So the priests ask him: "Are you Elijah?" He says no. "Are you one the prophets?" He says no.

Now, other people will call John a prophet. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even Jesus will regard John the Baptizer as a prophet. Jesus even calls John, "Elijah." But John the Forerunner, in his humility, will claim no such honor for himself. To do so would put the focus on him, instead of on the one who is to come.

Eventually, after three "No's," the priests and Levites try a different tack. They ask an open-ended question, "Who are you? ... What do you say about yourself?" John replies using the words of Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

Now there's a wonderful message here from John. And we can easily misunderstand it.

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" It sounds like some guy standing in the middle of nowhere shouting out in a vacuum with no one to hear him. But that's not the case with John. He's only 15 miles from Jerusalem, the capital city. He's not out in the middle of nowhere. Yes, he is in a rugged, wilderness area. He is in the desert. But he's also in relatively close proximity to Jerusalem, the center of Judaism.

Last week Kathy Vail in her sermon compared the Judean wilderness to Big Bend. That's an excellent comparison. Big Bend looks a lot like the Judean wilderness. But the big difference is distance. If Big Bend were as close to us as Slaton or Idalou, that would give us a better sense of where John the Baptist is preaching. He's not in a distant place. He's in a desert place that is close by.

Because of that proximity, John the Forerunner has huge crowds coming to listen to him. And that's why the Levites and the priests are worried. John is not a lonely voice in the distant wilderness. He is a voice in the nearby wilderness attracting crowds.

He's not a lone voice crying out in the far distant middle of nowhere. Instead, John is telling us to make a path through the nearby wilderness, a road through the deserts that are close to home, a highway through those empty places that are close at hand.

This is not some far distant project. Instead, John the Baptizer is asking us to prepare our nearby roads for the coming of the Lord. He's telling us to go to the wilderness places in our own lives to prepare for Jesus.

John the Forerunner is calling us to go into the empty places that are in us, to fix up the road for Jesus' coming.

Now, John didn't know anything about highways made of asphalt or concrete. Instead he's thinking about a dirt road.

Most of us knows what happens to dirt roads. They get ruts in them. They wash out in places. Sometimes big rocks get exposed making things bumpy.

John's message to us is, "Get out there into those wilderness places in your life. Fix up that dirt road. Get rid of the rocks. Smooth out the ruts. Fill in the holes. Prepare for the coming of the Lord."

During the secular holiday season, preparing for the coming of Jesus can often be a matter of trying to clear a path in the middle of the wilderness. During Advent, we are called to pay special attention to fixing up our roads. Yes, it's a short Advent. Yes, there's only a week before Christmas. But there are things we can do to help us in our last-minute preparations.

What needs fixing on your road? How can you smooth the way for Jesus to come to you? One of the greatest things about Advent is that you can ask God for help in repairing your spiritual road. God is not only the intended traveler you're preparing the road for. God is also ready to do construction, helping you in fixing your road.

Maybe there are potholes in your road. Maybe there are empty spaces. Maybe there are failed relationships that leave holes in your life. Maybe you try to fill them by buying the right present, thinking that material objects will somehow heal broken relationships. Maybe you're trying to fill the holes by engaging in lots of frantic activity, rushing around trying to do everything. The reality is, the only thing that can really fill the voids and holes in your life is God.

So ask God, "Come, fill me. Fill the empty places in my life with your Spirit, with your presence. Heal me and make me whole."

Or, maybe there are rocks and obstructions on your road. Maybe there are things that you keep bumping into. Maybe there are things you keep stumbling and tripping over. Maybe you try to ignore these obstructions, thinking that a layer of wrapping paper or a covering of tinsel will make them go away during the month of December. But as much as you try to ignore them, they keep getting in the way. The reality is, the only thing that can remove these impediments is God. So ask God, "Come, move these blocks. Remove the things I keep stumbling over. Remove the things that block me from you. Help keep me open to you."

Or, maybe your road is full of ruts. Maybe you've been down this holiday road so many times before that the grooves in your road have become trenches. Maybe things have become boring and dull and humdrum. Maybe you're tired of going through all of this holiday rigmarole once again. The reality is, God is the source of life and creation. So ask God, "Come, renew me. Give me the joy and expectancy of first time parents preparing for a baby. Give me the wonder of a child awaiting Christmas. Give me the excitement of a person hearing for the first time, 'Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy.'"

There are many distractions during this time of year. There are many ways to get off track, or blocked, or stuck in a rut. The message of John the Forerunner is important for all of us: "Keep focused, and keep your priorities straight. In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord." Fill in the gaps. Smooth out the bumps. Grade the ruts. Repair the road. Get ready for the Lord.

John the Baptizer was very clear. He was not the light. And he didn't want anyone to get distracted into believing he was. He wanted to focus all the attention he could on Jesus. His message for us is as important as it ever was. Don't get distracted. Don't get diverted. Look to Jesus, and in the barren places of your lives, prepare for his coming.

"A man came sent from God, whose name was John. He came to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him. (John) himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."²

Like John the Forerunner, let us keep our focus on Jesus.

In the midst of distractions, let us point to the true meaning of Christmas, the coming of Jesus, the True Light of the World.

² John 1:6-8