

**Today's gospel begins with loaded words: "John the Baptist appeared from the desert announcing "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". John, the Baptist bursts on the scene from the desert as a great Advent figure preparing for the coming of the messiah**

**Notice that John came out of the desert. In scripture the desert was a place where**

- **People went to separate themselves from troubled relationships,**
- **They went to escape the busyness which can overwhelm them,**
- **They sought out the desert to take a break from the complicated urban life in the large city of Jerusalem ... to take a break and think things out.**

**Since the time of Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert, it became a place where people worked things out with the Lord.**

**John the Baptist comes out of the desert. He believes has gotten things right with God. And the people are going out to meet him at the Jordan River. They come to listen to the prophet who has been in the desert and to hear a message so that they can get things right with God. Maybe that's what we are doing this Advent. We come away to this place to escape the hectic and frenetic pace of life. We come to make sure we are right with the Lord this holiday season**

**(pause)**

**And what does John the Baptist announce to the people?  
What has he learned in the desert which he shares with the people?  
"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" That sounds like our advent theme: Find us ready Lord!**

**The Baptist says, “ REPENT!”**

**Change your minds**

**Change your behavior**

**The messiah is coming**

**One of the definitions of “repent” is “to see things differently.”**

**John the Baptist is living out what he preaches.**

**And he is right about the imminent coming of the Messiah. Jesus is at hand. He is right that people must change their lives, be more caring and just towards their neighbor.**

**But what I really like John the Baptist, because that even though he announces the immediate coming of the messiah, even though he calls us to change our way of thinking and living; the rest of his thinking about Jesus is all screwed up! John falsely sees the messiah as someone who is full of fire and brimstone**

**John warns the people that when the messiah comes “The tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**

**John says. “I baptize you with water, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire! He says, those who are unrepentant, ‘will be thrown like chaff into the fire!**

**While announcing the need for others to repent, John himself does not see things right.**

**Jesus simply does not fit the image of a fire and brimstone messiah proclaimed by John.**

**Oh yes, Jesus calls for repentance and conversion, but in words very different than John's: Jesus says:**

- **Love your enemies**
- **Pray for your persecutors**
  
- **Jesus heals the broken hearted**
- **He binds up wounds**
- **He forgives**

**John the Baptist would spend the rest of his life repenting... trying to see things right. Later in his life, John the Baptist, while in prison awaiting his martyrdom because he was challenging political leaders to repent is still very uncertain if Jesus is the Messiah. He surely is not the fire and brimstone messiah he expected. John sends his disciples to Jesus and says, "Are you the one who is to come, are you the messiah, or should we wait for someone else?"**

**Jesus answers with the very words which express what kind of messiah he is: and it is not the fire and brimstone kind.**

**He says to John's disciples, go tell John,  
The blind see  
The lame walk  
The deaf hear  
The poor have the good news preached to them  
And blessed is the one who is not scandalized in me.**

**John was expecting the Messiah to be a powerful enforcer,  
And what he got was a baby born in a manger.**

**What John wanted was a fire and brimstone Messiah**

**And what turned up was someone passionately committed to healing those who were broken in body and spirit.**

**What John wanted was a God who preached fear and damnation; What he found was a man totally committed to saving sinners.**

**John the Baptist was a great man. In fact, Jesus would say that he was the greatest man who had ever lived on the face of the earth. But he would also say that the least who followed him followed his way of living would be greater than John.**

**Do you think you have repented? Do you think your actions reflect the vision and life of Jesus? Or our lives filled with concerns about power, and money and prestige? Or like John, do we want a messiah who will bring fire and brimstone on the rich and famous and corrupt of our society? Can Jesus' way of living, loving God and neighbor, forgiving seventy times seven, turning the other cheek, really work? Can his way of living usher in the Kingdom?**

**Let me ask you a question: If you put a heavy weight boxer into a room with a three month old baby, whom do you think will conquer the other? It seems like a no brainer... all that might against the defenseless child.**

**But see the picture anew. The child sitting on the floor will call forth compassion from that brute of a guy and soon he will be holding and rocking the child and using language which only adults use with babies, trying to get the child to smile. Yes, God's ways are not our ways. Repent**

**Let me tell you another story: It is about one of the young adult men in our Sunday basketball group. He had a very difficult youth which**

included psychological abandonment and some physical abuse. And while having many successes in his life, he had one downfall: he got even with life by making a conquest of women. "Love em and leave em" was his motto. Each conquered woman became a virtual new trophy in his hall of fame.

Then one day, one of his conquests became pregnant and a little girl was born. As he took this new born little girl into his hands, began to wonder who she would become and who would love her. He began to see women differently. He began to repent. No fire and brimstone could change him; one little child allowed him to see life differently. God's ways are not our ways. Repent!

Yes, I would suggest this morning that we all have a bit of John the Baptist in each of us. How often we act like John the Baptist; how often do we wish fire and brimstone upon our enemies, some of whom are in our families! The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent!

But God still uses us in this Advent season. He still continues to invite us to repent: the Good news is that God sends us, like John the Baptist, unfinished, just as we are, to proclaim to our world that the messiah is in our midst.

Let me end the homily with a line from one of Graham Green's novels called "The Power and the Glory"

It is a story of a parish priest in Mexico in the 1930's. The civil government was persecuting the Church and priests were being sought out and killed. The priest was growing old and had not been very faithful to his vows. At times he drank too and had had his days of carousing with women.

**One day he gets a call to come and celebrate the prayers of the dying with a woman who is gravely ill. He knows it could be a trap by the government to catch and kill him. He decides to go and minister to the woman. As he is about to go, he uses words which could well be on the lips of John the Baptist and of us today. He says, "This woman who is dying deserves a saint, and God is sending me!"**

**Yes, God was not finished with John the Baptist that first Advent when he came out of the desert and called the people to repentance. And God is not finished with us. Never the less, God calls us to announce the good news that the messiah is among us even while we ourselves are learning the full implications of HIS marvelous life.**

**And so we pray, Find us ready Lord. Send us in your name.**