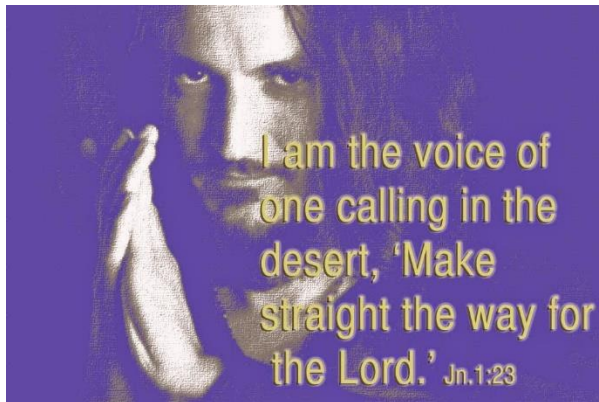


## Homily – December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – Third Sunday of Advent



John the Baptist, to put it mildly, is an interesting character. He was a prophet, and according to Jesus, the greatest of all the prophets (Lk. 7:28). Prophets have always, and still do, want more for us than what we want for ourselves. Once I get comfortable in my little kingdom, my little control tower, I really don't want

anyone else rattling my little world even if the rattling come with a promise of a bigger and better world, like the Kingdom of God. Prophets force us, always against our will, to move away from the comfortable top and middle and move to the bottom and the edges of things. At the edges of life, if we dare to go, the prophets tell us we will find what is real, true, enduring, beautiful, what is of God, and what *is* God. If we have to go to the desert to find that, John the Baptist, and prophets who walk among us today, will be the first to lead the way.

We mostly see John the Baptist as a prophet, but he was also a priest, a very different priest. John was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth; Elizabeth being Mary's cousin. By virtue of the fact that Zechariah belonged to the priestly class of Jews, it automatically made John, his son, a priest as well. Before he was even born, we knew John was going to be a different priest, a different prophet, a different human being altogether. One day, while in the sanctuary of the Temple lighting incense, Zechariah is visited by an angel. The angel tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son and they are to name him John (the Baptist). Tradition had it that Zechariah, the father, would name his son, but it's the angel that gives John his name. That's the first tipoff that John will be a different priest and that Tradition would have to be broken, because Tradition, in this case, is getting in the way of something wonderful breaking into the world.

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, belonged to the priestly class, but John wanted nothing to do with aristocratic priests in Jerusalem. He didn't dress like a

priest, he didn't eat like a priest, he didn't live like a priest, and he didn't mollycoddle the people with soft truths that bordered on lies. John went to the desert and set up camp there. He just knew there were too many distractions and too many luxuries in the city of Jerusalem that would draw him away from his true calling from God. Giving up the fine robes and living in the desert was the second telltale sign that John was a different priest.

Because of his words and actions, we know that John is sent by God. The priests and Levites, who question him, are not sent by God. They are sent by the higher-ups of Jerusalem, the Pharisees, on a fact-finding mission. The priest and Levite, as you may remember from the Good Samaritan parable, were the two who passed by the half dead man in the ditch and walked on as if it was business as usual. Being sent by God, rather than being sent by lackeys, is the third tipoff that John is a different priest pointing people to a Messiah who will be vastly different than what they expected.

These minions, sent by the Pharisees, start off with a direct question about who John is. He tells them who he is not. If they are looking for the big fish, the "Messiah," they are looking at the wrong guy. John goes on to tell these cronies that he is not Elijah who came back from heaven nor is he the Prophet (Moses). They cannot return to the Pharisees with a report that John is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet as that would not be seen as mission accomplished. The priests and Levites seem to be saying, "Give us a break. We have a job to do." These inquisitors, sent by the Pharisees, are growing frustrated. So they try another approach. They try to arrive at John's identity through his activity. If he's not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet, why is he baptizing? John tells them that if they want to know who he is, and why he is baptizing, they have to know the one who is coming after him. He tells them that there is a big difference between his water baptism and the baptism of the one coming after him. John's baptism only makes sense in light of the future one. However, the future one is already standing among them, and they do not know him. They came to solve the mystery of John, but they are introduced to the mystery beyond John, the mystery of the

Messiah. It will not go well when these flunkies return to their suspicious, unforgiving leaders in Jerusalem.

At some point in our lives, we all have to go to the desert. As good as our parents' faith was in getting us going in life, at some point we have to make it our own. Being sent to the desert is fine because we were all children at one time. But if we are to grow into an adult faith, we have to go to the desert willingly for our own reason and mouth the words, "Who are you, Jesus? Who are you for me and for the world?"

***Once upon a time there was a wise abbot of a monastery who was the friend of an equally wise rabbi. This was in the old country, long ago, when times were always hard, but just then they were even worse. The abbot's community was dwindling, and the faith life of his monks was fearful, weak and anxious. He went to his friend and wept. His friend, the Rabbi, comforted him, and said "There is something you need to know, my brother. We have long known in the Jewish community that the Messiah is one of you."***

***"What," exclaimed the abbot, "the Messiah is one of us? How can this be?" But the Rabbi insisted that it was so, and the abbot went back to his monastery wondering and praying, comforted and excited. Once back in the monastery, he would pass by a monk and wonder if he was the one. Sitting in chapel, praying, he would hear a voice and look intently at a face and wonder, is he the one. The abbot had always been kind, but now began to treat all of his brothers with profound kindness and awe, ever deeper respect, even reverence. Soon everyone noticed. One of the other brothers came to him and asked him what had happened to him.***

***After some coaxing, the abbot told him what the rabbi had said. Soon the other monk was looking at his brothers differently, with deeper respect and wondering. Word spread quickly: the Messiah is***

***one of us. The monastery was suddenly full of life, worship, love and grace. The prayer life was rich and passionate, devoted, and services were alive and vibrant. Soon the surrounding villagers came to the services, listening and watching intently, and many joined the community of monks. After their novitiate, when they took their vows, they were told the mystery, the truth that their life was based upon, the source of their strength, the richness of their life together: The Messiah is one of us. The monastery grew and expanded into house after house, and the monks grew in wisdom and grace before each other and in the eyes of God. And they say still, that if you stumble across this place where there is life and hope and kindness and graciousness, that the secret is the same: The Messiah is one of us.***

Let's live the rest of Advent with that sneaking suspicion that the Messiah is one of us, whom we do not know. Let's also live the rest of Advent giving thanks for those who, like John, invite us to the desert and point us to the Real.

Fr. Phil