

The Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

Matthew 3:1-12

Who is the strange character in today's Gospel who lives in the desert, wears camel's hair clothing, and eats wild food? Even though he seems eccentric, people flock to hear him and to be baptized.

In challenging the Pharisees and Sadducees, and in pointing to the One who is to come after him, John the Baptist paints a picture of an ideal world. While doing that, John is convinced that the One to come isn't going to bring about this world alone. The new world, God's kingdom, will only come when each person courageously lives his or her life as Jesus lived his. For instance, John tells

his followers that the Messiah they're expecting to transform this world will actually be concerned with judging their attempts to change this world. Jesus' image and expectation of the ideal world is that it will be a do-it-yourself venture, but not a solitary do-it-yourself project. The Baptist assures the people (and us) that the Holy Spirit will always be the spark enkindling all we do to live God's kingdom.

This strange man, John the Baptist, is a prophet, judge, and precursor; he visions, assures, and challenges: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"



"Feeling sorry, acknowledging guilt, and prolonging regret may be components of the human condition, but they are not what Jesus means by repentance. Repentance is the response to grace that overcomes the past and opens out to a new future.... The message of Jesus is not 'Repent,' but 'Repent for the kingdom of God is near.'"

— John Shea, *A Star at its Rising*

POINTS TO PONDER

How does the message of John the Baptist sound today — like a warning? Praise? Reprimand?

What is the good fruit that God is calling me to produce this week?

How do I make it easier for others to see the kingdom of God in our midst?



The feast of the **Immaculate Conception**, proclaimed on December 8, 1854, celebrates the belief that Mary was uniquely blessed from the very beginning with the gift of grace. Often we say that Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her birth — very true. Another way of saying it is that Mary was filled with grace, surrounded from the beginning in the love of God. Mary then lived her daily life — the joys and sorrows as well as the challenges — in and with grace, in a trusting relationship with God, and continually aware of the presence of God, always and everywhere.

5 Ways

to Practice Advent Joy

Ask a trusted friend or family member their thoughts about what you need to “repent” from (drawing attention to yourself, inattentiveness to those who are bothersome, etc.).

John shouted his message to the people.

Decide on one thing you can do that “shouts” to your world that you are a disciple of Jesus.

We can't wait for others

to do something to bring about the kingdom of God. What things are not what they ought to be?

Write a letter to the editor or to politicians; become involved in grass-roots efforts for change.

To celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception, place out-of-season flowers at your Mary statue as a reminder that “nothing is impossible for God.”

Grace isn't a thing; it's a relationship. Grace doesn't have to be extraordinary; it can be very ordinary. Grace-filled times aren't only in church; they're everywhere. Be very aware today. Be alive to the wonder, the gift, and the presence of grace.



FAMILYTIME

Legends surrounding St. Nicholas tell us that he led a life of giving, of sharing his wealth, especially to families and children. Celebrate his feast day (December 6) with an ancient tradition — leaving small gifts in your children's shoes (such as chocolate coins). Also invite your children to “help St. Nicholas” by giving to children in need some of their toys and books that they no longer use.



Catechism CONNECTION

“*St. John the Baptist* is the Lord's immediate precursor or forerunner, sent to prepare his way.... He inaugurates the Gospel.... Going before Jesus ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah,’ John bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 523

Advent Prayer

God of challenge, you raised up John the baptizer as a messenger calling us to change. Nudge us to conversion, to change, and to repent so that all our actions will reflect and intensify the presence of the kingdom of God.