



Meditation for the Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2020

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." [Isaiah 40:3-5]

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [Mark 1:4]

Thomas Merton has said, *"The Advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ."*

This weekend, we hear Isaiah and John the Baptist together illustrate what Merton means.

John the Baptist was very clear about who he was and who he was not. This was, in a way, what made him such a strange and striking figure. According to tradition, he lived in the wilderness, "clothed with camel's hair," and ate "locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). This simply means that he lived as a nomad, having rejected all aspects of domestic life. He was such a fiery and inspirational preacher that Herod had him killed.

John the Baptist broke all the rules. As the son of a priest in the Jerusalem temple, he had a solemn duty to follow his father as a priest and to make sure the priestly line was continued by marriage and children. But John the Baptist turned his back on this obligation. He had such a deep conviction that God would fulfill within his own lifetime the promise of a kingdom where no one was poor or powerless, and he was so convinced of the urgency of preparing for that way of living, that he rejected everyone else's expectations and became a solitary, itinerant preacher in the wilderness near the Jordan River.

Even with crowds coming to hear him preach, even with the clarity of his vision, John knew that it is both necessary and possible for all of us to repent and change our priorities and that no work is more important than preparing for the fulfillment of God's promises. In a time as dark and confusing as these days through which we are living, John urged us to join him in the beginning of the end of all that obscures the peace and wholeness that God has promised.

His call for repentance was a reassurance as much as it was a warning.

You must change your life, he warned.

You can change your life, he promised.

John O'Donohue echoes both John the Baptism and Thomas Merton in his poem, "For one who is exhausted":

*You have traveled too fast over false ground;
now your soul has come to take you back.
Take refuge in your senses, open up
to all the small miracles you rushed through.
Become inclined to watch the way of rain
when it falls slow and free.*

*Imitate the habit of twilight,
taking time to open the well of color
that fostered the brightness of day.
Draw alongside the silence of stone
until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.*