

A teenage boy passed his driving test and asked his father about using the family car. His father said that he would make a deal with him. He told his son that when he brought his grades up, studied his Bible some, and got his hair cut, they would revisit his request to use the car. The boy thought about it and agreed. About six weeks later, the son inquired again about using the family car. His father said, “You’ve brought up your grades and I see you’ve been studying your Bible but I must admit that I’m a little disappointed that you haven’t cut your hair.” The son replied, “You know, dad, I noticed when I was studying my Bible that John the Baptist had long hair.” The dad responded, “Did you also notice that he walked everywhere?”

John the Baptist is a prominent figure in our Gospel readings during Advent and it’s true that he did walk everywhere. When the proper time came, he walked out into the desert to prepare for the coming of someone mightier than he - someone whose sandals he wasn’t even worthy to stoop down and loosen the thongs of. That’s saying a lot about the mightier one to come. In that culture, attending to another’s sandals was a servant’s job. And what a sight John must have been. He had that long hair and wore clothes made out of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts dipped in wild honey. John definitely stood out and was a sight to behold.

But why did he feel compelled to live an ascetic lifestyle and go out into the desert to prepare the way of the Lord? It’s actually quite simple. He encountered the Lord before he was even born and his life was disturbed. You may recall the story of the pregnant Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth while Elizabeth was also pregnant. The baby that leapt in Elizabeth’s womb at Mary’s greeting would come to be known as John the Baptist. John encountered the Lord and his life could never be the same.

John went on to gain notoriety and many thought that he himself might be the long-awaited messiah. But John didn't get caught up in all of the fame. His head didn't swell with pride at the crowds coming to see him. He kept pointing to the mightier one that was yet to come. John was the voice that our reading from Isaiah prophesied about - the voice of the one crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" That's exactly what John did but he never made it about himself. John always kept the focus on the right person – the Lord. John gives us a lesson in humility.

Brothers and sisters, we're called to be modern day John the Baptists. We're called to be the voice of the one crying out in the desert - each and every one of us in our own way. John stood out like a sore thumb. So should we. If you think about it, in many ways, we already do. When we make the sign of the cross in public, people stare. When we express our Christian beliefs at work or at school, some people think we've gone mad. When we come to Mass, some of us are dressed a little funny. When we celebrate the Eucharist, outsiders think it's just as strange as eating locusts dipped in wild honey.

Just like John, we encounter the Lord and our lives are disturbed. They can never be the same. We see this in a particular way in the sacraments of the Church. In Baptism, we become members of the Body of Christ and our lives are disturbed. In Confirmation, the Holy Spirit gives us the gifts and the strength to be soldiers for our Lord and our lives are disturbed. In Reconciliation, we receive the Lord's mercy and forgiveness and our lives are disturbed. In Anointing of the Sick, we receive the Lord's healing and our lives are disturbed. In Marriage and Holy Orders, some of us are given a special vocation and our lives are disturbed. In the Eucharist, we encounter the Lord in a special and intimate way. He gives us his very self as food for our journey. He sustains us in our weakness and our lives are disturbed.

Every time we encounter the Lord, whether it's through the sacraments or whether it's in others that we meet, our lives are disturbed and we can never be the same. There's no going back to the way we were before. We can't be lukewarm in our faith. Claiming to be a follower of the Lord without living His message is not enough. This disturbance in our lives should animate us to be even more fervent in preparing for the coming of the Lord.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent; which means we are one week closer to celebrating Christmas. Celebrating how God intervened in human history in a special way to save us. But there's work to be done. We may not be in a physical desert or wasteland but that doesn't mean it isn't just as real. We're surrounded by a wasteland of unbelief and a desert of mediocrity. If you don't believe me, turn on the television or pull up the internet. You'll see a constant stream of violence, murder, and sex. You'll see commercials trumpeting for selfishness and sin. You'll see the breakdown of the family and the erosion of morality. We're inundated with it 24/7. There's no way to escape it. The amount of noise out there makes it hard to hear our cries. That means we have to cry out even louder. We have to work even harder to stand out.

As our first reading tells us, there are valleys that need to be filled in and mountains that need to be made low. Think of the valleys of despair, depression, hunger, and homelessness. Think of the valleys that take the form of income gaps, educational deficits, lack of daycare and medicine for children, lowered immune systems, joblessness, loneliness, and lives that are brought to an abrupt end before they even begin. These valleys devour our human dignity and hope. Preparing the way of the Lord means doing what we can to fill in those valleys and to convert our modern wasteland into a highway for our God. Each one of us can do something on this front, no matter how small.

We've also got mountains that need to be made low. Think of the mountains of racism and violence. Think of the mountains of greed in our economy, the addictions in our neighborhoods, and the violence in our families and our schools. Think of the mountains that block communication between spouses or between parents and their children. These mountains prevent us from seeing that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. Lowering these mountains is preparing the way of the Lord – making straight his paths. We can all chip away at these mountains a little at a time.

I know I've painted an overwhelming picture but there is no reason for despair. Our God comforts us and never leaves us. Saint Peter knew what it was like to have his life disturbed by the Lord. He encountered the Lord on the banks of the Sea of Galilee and his life was never the same. In our second reading, he gives us guidance. He reminds us that our Lord is patient with us and doesn't wish for any of us to perish. He goes on to tell us what type of person we ought to be. We ought to be conducting ourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the Lord. We can't be content to just wait. We ought to be making straight paths to hasten the coming of God's promise of justice, love, and peace.

We're called to be the voice crying out in the desert for the one mightier that is coming – someone whose sandals we are not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of. Living out our Christian faith means living a disturbed life. People may look at us funny. People may stare. People may think we've gone mad. And that's ok. We're modern day John the Baptists. Every minute we're closer to the coming of the Lord. What are we doing to prepare for it?