

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been a great week to be Episcopalian. I thought the funeral of President Bush was magnificently done, and I was so pleased to see and hear for the second time in six months an Episcopalian minister preach a fantastic gospel in front of a worldwide audience. Very good to see.

Close to home, we too had a very good week. Last weekend, I thought our Advent season got off to a magnificent start. The Christmas bizarre was a great occasion, very jolly with record sales. We started some new traditions with our tree going up, and we had a magnificent, sublime Advent Lessons and Carols service in a packed Bishop's Chapel. We had a significant piece of art installed in the chapel, and all this going on whilst the Interfaith Shelter was in our home.

I'm grateful for all volunteers who made all this activity possible, and we should be grateful to God for blessing us, for energizing us with His Spirit. Last week was indicative of a church on the move. We're making progress, we're finding an identity, and we're reaching out beyond our walls. As my esteemed colleague Walter might say, "It's all good."

Now we arrive at the second Sunday of Advent, and we're confronted with John the Baptist. If you want to ensure that we observe Advent as a penitential season and not collapse into the sentimentality of Christmas, then John the Baptist is your man. He is guaranteed to puncture any inappropriate self-satisfaction that we might have. He's the one prophet that you don't want turning up to your Christmas party. He's unkempt. He'd come inappropriately dressed, wearing clothes of camel hair. If he didn't smell, his clothes certainly would.

He wouldn't eat the food you offered. He'd probably bring his own locusts in a bag. And you wouldn't want him talking to your guests. Can you imagine? This is a man with absolutely no small talk and a rather disconcerting habit of straight talking. John the Baptist was not known for mincing the words. In other words, he's the perfect person to be thinking about in Advent. This season is meant to be

unsettling with its emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ. It's a reminder that there's another kingdom, that this world is not all that there is.

It asks us the question, are we living our lives in the light of eternity? What do our lives look like from that standpoint? It's an invitation to examine ourselves. It requires us to ask, how are we living our lives? Are we investing in the things of eternal value, those things of the kingdom that will last?

So, back to John the Baptist, what do we need to say about him? There's much that could be said, but I'll just pick out two things, the first of which is obvious. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the coming King. This comes across strongly in our readings. The Old Testament prophet Malachi foresaw that God would send His messenger to prepare the way. John's father, Zechariah, recognized that his son would be called the prophet of the Most High, for he would go before the Lord to prepare His way. In our gospel reading from Luke, we hear John described as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight."

This language would conjure up to the first hearers a literal image of somebody going before a noble royal person preparing their way because the roads were rough. So they needed someone to go ahead of their carriage or their horse just to smooth out the path. Advent is a time to do that kind of preparation. It's a time to prepare, to get our lives ready for the coming of the King. My grandfather spent some time as a itinerant missionary in Ireland, and he was once on a journey and he had a most fastidious roommate. My grandfather was quite fastidious, so for him to think someone fastidious is saying something.

This chap, every night when they got undressed, he would fold his clothes in a very particular order and pile them up neatly by his bed and even go to the length of taking his handkerchief out of his pocket, folding it in a certain way, and placing it on top of the pile. My grandfather said to him after watching this for a few days, "Why do you do the same thing every night?" He said, "Oh, I want to be ready if Jesus comes in the night."

Now, when John the Baptist is talking about preparing the way, he's not saying anything about what you do with your handkerchiefs last thing at night. But we all have a tendency, like my grandfather's roommate, to reduce great spiritual truths into something we can understand and control. Folding our clothes so we'll be ready for the return of Jesus is a great example of that. It's slightly missing the point. It avoids asking the real deep question that needs to be asked as we prepare to meet the King: is it well with our souls?

John the Baptist was and is an unsettling figure because he attacks the complacency of his hearers. When people went out to meet him in the wilderness, even before they said anything, we're told that he turned to them and said, "I know what you're thinking. You think you're okay with God because Abraham was your father. But don't presume on God's mercy," he says. "Don't become complacent in your relationship with God." I often hear people say, "I'm a cradle Episcopalian," as if there's some place in heaven reserved for cradle Episcopalians.

We can't presume that because we go to church, because we're Episcopalian, because we follow the 10 Commandments, because we try not to hurt anybody else, that we're living the life that God would have us live, that we're receiving all that God wants to give us. He's always calling us into a deeper and deeper relationship with Him. There's always more to learn. Let us be prompted by John and others never to be complacent when it comes to our relationship with our creator God.

The second thing I want to say about John is that his message was very simple. The gospel reading says he went into all the region proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. I noted that the preacher at President Bush's funeral had a visual aid. So, given that's obviously okay, I've got my own visual aid to show you today. It's a chalkboard that my father had when he was at school. He was at school a very long time ago. He was asked one day in class to draw a picture of a pig.

So he got a piece of chalk and drew a pig on his chalkboard, and then the teacher said, "Show me

your pig." My father showed him the pig, and the teacher said, "Hargreaves, what kind of a... That doesn't even look like a pig because it doesn't look round." And he said, "What do you mean, it doesn't look round?" *[Shows pig's face turning and pointing to the rear by using a trick chalkboard. Audience laughter. -Ed.]*

I call this my repentant pig because every time I speak about repentance, I bring him out because he illustrates a great truth about repentance, because repentance is about turning round. That's the actual meaning of the Greek word "metanoia," which means repentance. It's a turning around.

To repent is to acknowledge our faults and failings, but not to stay there, then to turn around and move in a different direction. To repent is not to be left wallowing in a sense of guilt and shame. It's a turning around, a turning away from that. Jesus encouraged His followers to travel light, not to carry any baggage, including baggage of guilt and shame. They're to be left behind. The baptism of repentance John offered, we note, was for the forgiveness of sins, which is why a few verses later Luke says, "And with many other words, John exalted the people and preached the good news to them." Good news. John the Baptist isn't normally associated with that, but forgiveness of sins is always good news.

I wasn't a very naughty boy when I was young, but I did have my moments. One of the least spectacular was when I was playing in front of my father's church. It was a great church, and it had enormous 70-foot windows at the front. It wouldn't have been too bad had I not been playing with a golf club. I was standing in front of the window, and my back swing was even more rudimentary in those days than it is now. As the club came up behind my shoulder, I heard the shattering of glass. I didn't need to look 'round to know that there was now a hole in a 70-foot window at the front of church. I rushed home and locked myself in the bathroom. My father came up to find out what I was doing, and I felt safe to confess what I had done from behind the bathroom door. Once I was assured that I'd be forgiven, I opened the door and came out.

Too many of us live our lives behind a spiritual locked bathroom door, unsure if there is forgiveness on the other side, aware of our failings and shortcomings but less confident of the promise of forgiveness.

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a message that is amplified over and over again in the New Testament. We're called to repent and to examine our lives because we can be sure of God's forgiveness. As with John the Baptist, the call to repentance is always accompanied by the promise of forgiveness.

Let's use this advent season to take an honest look at ourselves, to see where we need to repent, to guard against those areas of complacency, safe in the knowledge that we are a loved and forgiven people.

Amen.