

Prepare the Way: A Guide to Advent with John the Baptist

THE FORERUNNER: WHO WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST?



THE MESSAGE: LESSONS FOR ADVENT



John's Baptism (Preparation)	vs.	Christian Baptism (Transformation)
Purpose: A symbol of repentance for Christ's coming.		Purpose: Forgiveness of sins and new life in the Church.
Effects: A moral disposition; no spiritual grace given.		Effects: Confers sanctifying grace and the Holy Spirit.
Duration: Transitory and in need of fulfillment in Christ.		Duration: A once-for-all, unrepeatable sacrament.

Reading 1 - [Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10](#)

The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.

Responsorial Psalm - [Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10](#). R. (cf. Is 35:4) Lord, come and save us.

Reading 2 - [James 5:7-10](#)

Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brothers and sisters, about one another, that you may not be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates. Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers and sisters, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Gospel - [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

When John the Baptist heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the

deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you. Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Summary of Homily

This homily synthesizes an analysis of the Third Sunday of Advent, focusing on the theological significance of John the Baptist as the central guide for spiritual preparation. The core theme is that Advent is a season of joyful preparation for the threefold arrival of Jesus Christ—in history (Bethlehem), in mystery (the Eucharist), and in majesty (the end of time). This preparation is achieved through *metanoia*, a profound spiritual transformation aimed at making oneself a "worthy temple of the Holy Spirit."

A critical distinction is drawn between the baptism of John and Christian Baptism. John's was a preparatory, symbolic human act signifying a desire for repentance, while Christian Baptism is a divine, sacramental reality that confers sanctifying grace, forgives sin, and incorporates believers into the divine life of the Trinity. Despite John's greatness—hailed by Christ as the greatest "among those born of women"—the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is considered greater because they participate directly in this new reality.

John's life provides a practical, five-part framework for Advent observance: a call to repentance, the charge to "make straight His paths" by removing spiritual obstacles, the practice of humility ("He must increase, but I must decrease"), the mission of pointing others to Christ, and the necessity of bearing spiritual fruit. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is identified as a primary and effective tool for this preparatory work. Ultimately, the hope announced by John finds its complete fulfillment in the living reality of the Church and the reception of Christ in the Eucharist, which provides the definitive answer to John's question: "Are you the one who is to come?"

***O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.***

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

***O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace.***

The words of this Advent Hymn, I thought were perfect for this 3rd Sunday of Advent, to help to bring together the gospel reading and the first reading. The way in which the first verse really speaks of the longing of the people of Israel and the Messiah that they were patiently waiting and longing for, him who John the Baptist saw, the Messiah coming in history. And then the last verse which speaks to the reality of the coming of the King in the days of John the Baptist. The One who melts away our divisions as our King of Peace.

Now we are blessed with His coming in mystery as we celebrate Mass and receive him in the Eucharist, and we wait again, for his coming in Majesty. During this time, we must, as St. James said in the second reading, "*Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord... Make your hearts firm, because*

the coming of the Lord is at hand. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates." With must be patient with God's timing, and patient with ourselves even while we eagerly seek holiness during this time of waiting. At the heart of our waiting is our preparation, and at the heart of our preparation is transformation. Metanoia. We prepare for Christ in daily life and weekly worship through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which, in its rhythms, helps us to understand our Advent journey.

A GOOD ADVENT EQUALS A BETTER CHRISTMAS, because the Advent season is a time when we are looking joyfully toward celebrating more fully the incarnation of the Son of God, the birth among us of our savior, by focusing on spiritual transformation. Transformation defined as the process of becoming a worthy temple of the Holy Spirit where the infant King may remain in us. On the Second Sunday of Advent, John directed us to reflected on the Sacrament of Baptism. I ended with reference to the work of the Holy Spirit and fire necessary to a fruitful personal metanoia, that our Advent preparation involves reorienting thoughts and hearts toward God's will. That with our cooperation, the Holy Spirit will work to aid our preparation / pursuit of holiness burning the chaff of our hearts and minds with that unquenchable fire. Not only fueling our life in Christ but burning away the sin, the desires that are not of God.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, Jesus directs us to reflect on John the Baptist, the nature of his baptism and how it is that we, the least of the kingdom could be considered greater than the greatest man born of women. So today we are focused on how we can be guided by the ministry and lessons of John the Baptist. What he can teach us about our preparation for celebration. But first, let's consider the important differences between the baptism of John and the Sacramental Baptism in Christ.

The Voice in the Wilderness:

A Theological Analysis of John the Baptist as Precursor and Advent Guide

Understanding the role of John the Baptist at this pivotal moment in human history and the fundamental differences between the baptism of John and that of Christ, allows us to better reflect on how John the Baptist emerges as the central and guiding figure, a practical model for how we ought to spiritually prepare for Christ's threefold arrival: in history at Bethlehem, in mystery in the Eucharist, and in majesty at the end of time. His historical actions provide a clear and compelling blueprint for our own spiritual work.

John the Baptist stands in salvation history not merely as a historical figure but as the pivotal theological hinge between the Old Testament's era of promise and the New Testament's era of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the final, thundering voice of the prophets, whose ministry shatters centuries of prophetic silence to announce the immediate arrival of the Messiah. His work was to prepare humanity for the "great hope" that, as Pope Benedict XVI articulated in *Spe Salvi*, "can only be God," the one who encompasses all reality and bestows what we cannot attain on our own.¹ John's cry in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for the revelation of this very hope in the person of Jesus.

The Hinge of the Covenants

To grasp the full weight of the Gospel narrative, one must first understand John the Baptist's unique and unrepeatable position within salvation history. His role as the final and greatest prophet is not a mere honorific; it defines the critical transition from an age of promise to an age of immediate realization. John does not simply foretell a future event; he points to a present person, bridging the two covenants in his

¹ *It becomes evident that man has need of a hope that goes further. It becomes clear that only something infinite will suffice for him, something that will always be more than he can ever attain... we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.* Spe Salvi, #30-31

own ministry. There had been no prophet in Israel for hundreds of years, and if the Baptist truly was what was claimed, a prophet and the return of Elijah, the people could hardly let the opportunity pass.

Jesus himself proclaims John to be the pinnacle of prophetic history, stating, “there is none greater than John” and that he is “greater than anyone else born of women”. ^{Mt 11:11a} This greatness, as the Gospels clarify, derives directly from his proximity to the Messiah. While earlier prophets prepared God's people for a Savior who would arrive in a long-distant future, John the Baptist prepared them for the Messiah who was about to arrive. His singular destiny was to point out the Lamb of God, making him the definitive precursor. The expectation for such a figure was immense, arriving after a long and desolate period of prophetic silence.

Yet, Jesus immediately introduces a profound theological paradox: "the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." This statement signifies the profound and revolutionary shift inaugurated by Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Those who are born into the realized Kingdom through faith and baptism possess a direct, participatory knowledge of God's nature that surpasses what was available even to John. He stood at the threshold, but believers in Christ are invited to cross it, experiencing a life in God that even the greatest prophet could only announce. As the one prophesied by Isaiah, John fulfilled his specific vocation to "make straight the way of the Lord" ^{Jn 1:23}, bridging the Old and New Testaments and then ceding the stage to Christ. This unparalleled prophetic identity was not abstract; it was expressed through a singular, urgent ministerial call to repentance, designed to physically and spiritually prepare the people to have the ears to hear and the eyes to see.

The Ministry of *Metanoia*: A Baptism of Preparation

The strategic purpose of John’s ministry was not to establish a new, permanent institution but to serve as a necessary spiritual purification for the people of Israel. His work was a divine overture designed to make ready a nation fit for Christ the Lord. It was a radical call to re-evaluate and reorient one's life in immediate anticipation of the Messiah's arrival.

The core of John's message is encapsulated in his stark command: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". ^{Mt 3:2} The critical term here is the Greek *metanoieite* (repent), which signifies far more than simple sorrow for past sins. It demands a fundamental change of mind, a complete reorientation of one's entire life and worldview toward God's perspective. It is an internal turning that must precede any external rite. This internal disposition was then symbolized by his baptism in the Jordan, a powerful but ultimately preparatory act. A comparative analysis reveals the crucial distinctions between John's rite and the sacrament instituted by Christ.

Aspect	John's Baptism	Christian Baptism (Jesus')
Purpose	Repentance, preparation for Christ	Forgiveness of sins, regeneration, entry into Church life
Effects	No grace, no Holy Spirit; moral disposition only	Sanctifying grace, Holy Spirit, new creation, indelible character
Relation to Sin	Symbol of penance, not remission	Full purification from original/personal sins
Duration/Completion	Transitory; needed renewal in Christ	Once-for-all, unrepeatable
Trinitarian Revelation	Prepares for; manifested fully at Jesus' baptism	Reveals Trinity; incorporates into divine life

The theological implications flowing from this distinction are immense. John’s baptism was a potent symbol, a profound human gesture signifying a desire for purification, but it remained on the plane of

human initiative. It could dispose a soul toward grace but could not confer it. The rite's significance is thus found in what it anticipates: the transition from a human act of penance to a divine act of regeneration. Christian Baptism is not merely a more powerful version of John's rite; it is a different reality altogether—a sacrament instituted by Christ that effects what it signifies. It marks the shift from symbol to reality, from a preparatory rite that looks forward to grace to an efficacious sacrament that imparts the Holy Spirit, cleanses all sin, and incorporates the believer into the very divine life of the Trinity. This historical ministry of repentance provides the enduring spiritual framework for the Church's liturgical life, most pointedly during the season of Advent.

The Exemplar of Advent: A Model for Spiritual Preparation

During the liturgical season of Advent, John the Baptist emerges as the central and guiding figure. The Church presents him not as a distant historical character but as a timeless, practical model for how believers ought to prepare their hearts for Christ's threefold arrival: in history at Bethlehem, in mystery in the Eucharist, and in majesty at the end of time. His historical actions provide a clear and compelling blueprint for our own spiritual work. The key lessons from his life form the core of authentic Advent preparation.

- **The Call to Repentance:** The foundational act of Advent preparation is answering John's call to *metanoia*. It is a summons to a fundamental change of mind and heart, turning away from our own preoccupations and reorienting our lives entirely toward God's will.
- **Making Straight His Paths:** John took up the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 40:3), calling on his listeners to build a straight highway for God. For the Advent Christian, this is the work of removing the spiritual obstacles of pride, selfishness, and sin that prevent Christ from having unimpeded access to our hearts.
- **Humility and Decreasing:** John's profound spiritual insight, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30), is the core posture of Advent. It is a conscious act of diminishing our own ego, our own desires, and our own importance to allow the light of Christ to shine more brightly in and through us.
- **Pointing to Christ:** John's primary function was to redirect attention from himself to Jesus. His identification of Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:29) is his ultimate success. During Advent, we are called to do the same—to point others to the true meaning of the season, who is Christ himself.
- **Bearing Fruit:** True conversion is not merely an internal feeling; it must be evidenced by tangible actions. John demanded that repentance produce the "good fruit of justice, mercy, and faith," a challenge that calls us to live our faith through concrete acts of charity and virtue.

These spiritual disciplines are not abstract ideals but a practical guide for observing Advent. The goal is to cultivate a loving, cleansed soul, where the infant King may find room and remain. In this context, the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes a most natural way to celebrate God's forgiveness and love, allowing us to actively clear and keep clear a path for the Lord. This individual preparation finds its ultimate meaning within the corporate reality of the Church, where the hope John announced is fully realized.

From Forerunner to Fulfillment: The Hope Realized in the Church

The preparatory work of John the Baptist finds its complete fulfillment not in a fleeting historical moment, but in the living and enduring reality of Jesus Christ present in His Church. The "great hope" that John proclaimed was not an abstract concept but a person, and that person remains accessible to humanity through the sacraments and the communal life of the faithful. The Church itself, as the "nation fit for Christ the Lord" that John was sent to ready, serves as "incontrovertible evidence for rejoicing in hope."

For two millennia, the Catholic Church has maintained the same essential faith, sacraments, and hierarchical structure with which it began. This unbroken chain of belief and practice, from the Creed prayed in the early Church to the authority vested in the successor of Peter, is a powerful sign of its divine origin and preservation. This continuity is a tangible manifestation of the hope John announced. If it were merely a human institution, long ago it would have caved in under the constant pressure of corruption and cowardice that has plagued it from the time of Judas himself. But it hasn't. The Church itself is proof that a Christian's joyful hope is not blind but grounded in the truth of God.

The pinnacle of this realized hope is found in the celebration of the Mass, which is rightly called the greatest of all mercies. It is in the liturgy that John's own question from his prison cell—"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another"—receives its definitive and ongoing answer. In the Eucharist, believers do not merely remember a past event; they encounter the living Christ, receiving Him in His body, blood, soul, and divinity. Here, the forerunner's work is complete, as the faithful receive the very Lamb of God whom John first pointed out on the banks of the Jordan. Thus, the Eucharist provides the definitive fulfillment of the hope John announced, transforming his preparatory voice in the wilderness into the Church's eternal song of the Lamb.

Embracing Great Hope

Advent provides an opportunity to consider all that believers hope for, both as missionary disciples living in Christ and in the context of eternal life. The true state of a Christian is one of joy, not sadness, and celebration, not penance, because the Christian life is a participation in the life of heaven already begun here on earth. While believers need "lesser hopes" that sustain them daily, these are insufficient without the great hope that surpasses everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and can bestow what humanity cannot attain by itself. The preparation enables believers to receive Jesus Christ, particularly in the Eucharist, where he makes everything his own and takes it to the Father.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition (Based on Source Context)
Advent	The liturgical season of preparation focused on looking joyfully toward celebrating the incarnation of the Son of God. It is a time for spiritual transformation to become a worthy temple where Christ may reside.
Christian Baptism	A sacrament instituted by Christ that is a divine act of regeneration. It forgives original and personal sins, imparts sanctifying grace and the Holy Spirit, makes one a new creation, and incorporates the believer into the divine life of the Trinity.
Eucharist	The mystery in which Christ arrives and is received in His body, blood, soul, and divinity. It is described as the greatest of all mercies and the definitive, ongoing answer to John's question, "Are you the one who is to come?"
Great Hope	A hope that surpasses the "lesser hopes" of daily life and which can only be God. It is not an abstract concept but a person, Jesus Christ, who is accessible through his Church.
Hinge of the Covenants	A theological description of John the Baptist's unique and unrepeatable position in salvation history. He bridges the Old Testament's era of promise and the New Testament's era of fulfillment by pointing directly to the person of Jesus Christ.

Incarnation	The event of the Son of God being born among humans; the birth of the savior. Advent is a time of joyful preparation to celebrate this event more fully.
John's Baptism	A preparatory and transitory rite that was a potent symbol of penance and a profound human gesture signifying a desire for purification. It did not confer grace, the Holy Spirit, or the remission of sin, but disposed a soul toward grace in anticipation of Christ.
Metanoia	A Greek term for repentance that signifies a fundamental change of mind and heart. It is a complete reorientation of one's life and worldview toward God's will and is the foundational act of Advent preparation.
Sacrament of Reconciliation	A sacrament described as the most natural way to celebrate God's forgiveness and love during Advent. It is a practical spiritual tool for actively "clearing the path for the Lord" by removing spiritual obstacles.
Threefold Arrival of Christ	The three comings of Christ for which believers prepare: in history (at Bethlehem, celebrated at Christmas), in mystery (in the Eucharist at Mass), and in majesty (at the end of time).