

# IN THE DESERT, PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Fr. Steven Scherrer

*“John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon” (Mt 11:18).*

During Advent, John the Baptist is one of our models, along with the Virgin Mary and the prophet Isaiah. John, as we see in this verse, is an ascetic, who neither ate as others did, nor drank wine. His food was “locusts and wild honey” (Mt 3:4), and the angel Gabriel told John’s father, Zechariah, that “he shall drink no wine nor strong drink” (Lk 1:15). John, furthermore, lived in the desert from his youth. St. Luke tells us that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Lk 1:80). He was probably in the desert because Isaiah had said, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is 40:3-4). This text was important for John, for when they asked him, “what do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn 1:22-23).

John was already in the desert when he received his call to be a prophet. St. Luke tells us that “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Lk 3:2). But in reality John was called before his conception when the angel Gabriel announced his birth to his father, Zechariah, saying, “he will go before him [God] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17).

And in what better place could an ascetic live than in the desert? as the Egyptian monks discovered three centuries later. There, he prepared the way of the Lord, making “straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is 40:3). There, he lived an ascetical life of prayer and fasting. Jesus also recommended fasting, even though he himself did not fast, for he was living in the special wedding time of the inauguration of the kingdom. But he said, “The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:15).

The life of John in the desert is our model during Advent; and for monks, it is their model for the whole year and for their whole life; and not only for monks, for every believer is invited to follow the example of John and the ascetical teaching of Jesus (Mt 13:44-46; 19:21; 6:24,19-21) and of St. Paul (Gal 6:14; Col 3:1-2).

John awaited the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of God in the desert, in a life of prayer and fasting, renouncing the pleasures of the world in order to live for God alone with all his heart, without any division of heart, to be prepared when the Messiah would come; and he preached in order “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared”

(Lk 1:17). John taught as much by his life and example as by his word. Following him, we should turn to the Lord with all our attention and heart and live in silence, solitude, and fasting from the pleasures of the world to have a heart that is undivided in our love for God, and thus be prepared for the coming of the Lord.

So here we are with John in the desert. It is Advent, and we are preparing the way of the Lord. The uneven must be made level; the rough places, plane. How beautiful are the words of Isaiah which were surely John's own inspiration, leading him to take up a solitary life of prayer and fasting in the desert: "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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Is 40:3-5).

What better place is there to prepare the way of the Lord than in the desert? There, our senses are freed from the overload of the city. In order for our spirit to experience God's love and rich presence, we must remove all else from it, reducing external sensory stimulation to the necessary minimum. Hence the expanded horizon of the desert waste is ideal for one who wants to live crucified with Christ and with St. Paul to the world, and the world crucified to him (Gal 6:14). Here at last we can focus on the things that are above, and leave behind those of here below (Col 3:1-2). Here our spirit can expand and be purified to be united to God and renewed by him. Here in the desert we can appreciate the blessings of the kingdom of God on earth and prepare ourselves and our world for the return of our Lord in glory. Here we can make ready a way for him in our heart and in our world and receive him worthily when he comes.

In the desert we can live modestly and moderately (Phil 4:5), soberly and righteously (Titus 2:12), in silence and solitude, in meditation and work, in reading and writing, in prayer and fasting, preparing the way of the Lord. Here we can fill up the valleys and lower the mountains, level the uneven and make the rough places smooth. Here we can tame our spirit and purify it for the Lord, that we might be blameless at his coming (1 Thess 3:13). Each day we should be more purified, more emptied of the things, pleasures, entertainments, and distractions of the world, until that great day finally dawns, and we are admitted into the fullness of God's kingdom where we shall shine like the sun (Mt 13:43) and bask in the splendor of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal 4:2).

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