

John the Baptist is for Lent (Mark 1:9-15)

Not just Advent

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The second part of this Sunday's gospel reading describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry proclaiming the good news and calling people to repent. This begins, however, after the arrest of John the Baptist.

What kind of crisis must that have caused? Did his followers scatter as Jesus' did the night of Jesus' arrest? Did some of them follow Jesus instead? We know at least some of them were around to bury his body later, but John's arrest surely shook that ancient world.

Before this reading, at the book's opening, John was preparing the way by baptizing and had amassed a following despite his bizarre attire of camel hair and diet of locusts and wild honey. Then at the beginning of this section, he baptized Jesus. After this week's reading, Mark's Gospel doesn't mention the baptizer again for five more chapters, until his death comes up because Jesus is becoming known and being compared to John, whom Herod recalls beheading—and then the sordid tale of the dance and the head on the platter is relayed.

John the Baptist is my second-favorite biblical character (after Jesus). I own a John the Baptist puppet and even a nutcracker carrying a sign that says "repent." Liturgically, Christians tend to associate John the Baptist with not Lent but Advent and its message of preparation, even though he baptizes Jesus immediately before

the 40 days in the wilderness on which Lent is based. John's message of repentance is perfect for Lent, and Jesus takes up the message at the end of this passage, adding, "believe in the good news."

Reflecting on repentance, forgiveness of sins, and proclaiming good news can be a faithful way to embrace this Lenten reading in the spirit of John and Jesus. Whether or not we practice fasting by giving up something for Lent, we can embrace repentance by deliberately turning away from those things which draw us away from God. Reflecting on our sins so that we can repent of them sounds somber, but can help us to grasp the good news.

The arrest of John must have unsettled the faithful who were baptized by him or intended to be, but he did prepare the way for Jesus. In Lent, we are preparing for the good news of the resurrection, and a focus on John the Baptist at the beginning of this season sets the stage.