

I smell John the Baptist

By [Emory Gillespie](#)

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John the Baptist is an acquired taste, like roquefort. He's complex. He is an amalgamation of unanswered questions: Is he a zealot acting out the Exodus as a kind of political comedy sketch? Is he the leader of a rival faith community, a serious threat to the fledgeling Jesus movement? Is he a kind of Enkidu figure—a fugitive of our collective consciousness from the epic Gilgamesh—who crawls out of the wilderness, learns our ways well enough and then attempts to wrestle and pin our society to the ground, only to be admired briefly and then destroyed?

Whatever John is, he's not easy to put on a cracker. He's ancient, aged and moldy. He's tragic. Yet each Advent, he's here.

In the Luke version this year, he has no camel hair, locusts or honey, but that doesn't mean we can't smell them. We pastors can smell them whenever we take on the whole enterprise of Christmas as our private, personal task.

I remember one Christmas Eve, when I was trying to round up a live donkey. I remember another, I tried to learn how to play the guitar in a day so I could lead "Silent Night." (Our organist was suddenly sick. The song has what, three chords? How hard can that be?) I've tried for 25 years to keep way too many people spiritually afloat during the holidays. How about I visit every sad, sick, lonely, grieving person on Christmas Eve and take them a dozen of my homemade cookies, still warm from the oven?

Sometimes during Advent I try to give birth to the savior of the world, all by myself.

But here comes Big John, just in time. We don't see him, but we can smell him, and that smell means this hors d'oeuvre party is about to get interesting. First, we preachers are going to admit that we can't make the rough places smooth and the crooked places straight all by ourselves anymore. As John shouts, "All flesh shall see that this salvation comes from God."

I like the sound of that.