

The eerie call of John the Baptist

His followers realized there was no quick exit from the discomfort of his words.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue



Saint John the Baptist in the Desert, by Lucas van Leyden (National Gallery of Art / Rosenwald Collection / Creative Commons)

I've never understood who gets to decide how patron saints are assigned their causes. The process looks to me about as arbitrary as the way sub sandwiches get named at my local deli. John the Baptist is patron saint of (among other things) bird dealers; spasms and convulsions; Savannah, Georgia; hailstorms; and tailors. He's your intercessor when you can't find a buyer for your cockatoo and your go-to protector the next time you get your pants hemmed.

Speaking of clothing, John must be amused at the way modern preachers dwell on his camel hair outfit, the insect parts stuck in his teeth, and his consumption of wild honey. What other kind of honey was there in the middle of nowhere?! Pasteurized? Filtered? Costco packaged?

Perhaps you've heard that John is the guy we all have to go through in order to meet Jesus. He's the forerunner, the precursor, the cold shower you have to take before you're allowed to jump into the big public pool. Did I mention he's also the patron saint of baptism?

What fascinates me about John is that our first-century friends made the decision to go out and hear him in the wilderness. They took the initiative. He didn't come to them to dwell in their midst and inhabit their lives, as Jesus did. They had to go to him, leaving behind their comforts, conveniences, and suburban cul-de-sacs.

Once they got there, something about him worked on them. If his message told them their lives were messed up more than they ever realized, that had to be jolting. If his voice was the only one crying out in the silence of that landscape, that had to feel eerie. There aren't a lot of living things in the wilderness that make noise, and vast expanses of sand absorb sound better than even the softest carpeting. For its silence alone, the wilderness is an uncongenial place.

To approximate the experience of those early followers of John, we might take a field trip to an anechoic (literally "without echo") chamber. The background noise in these sound-absorbent rooms actually measures in negative decibels. The Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis, for example, have a chamber where the noise level is -20.3 dB. (For comparison's sake, a perfectly quiet room in a well-built house is about 30 dB.) For \$600/hour, you can pay for the experience of being alone in that chamber. Few visitors last longer than 20 minutes, says lab owner Steve Orfield, due to the unsettling disorientation that sets in immediately after the vault doors close and the lights go out.

The lack of an echo removes all air pressure on the ear drums. That sabotages spatial awareness and dissolves one's sense of balance. Most guests sit down quickly. To hear your own heart beating, blood flowing, bones grinding, and lungs expanding, researchers have noted, does most people in. The experience is highly disconcerting. You suddenly must endure a confrontation with yourself as the sounds of your own body start to drive you crazy.

Although we think of wilderness as being wide open, it can also hem us in and force us to reckon with deep realities. At the beginning of the Red Sea story, for example, the Lord says to Moses that Pharaoh will tell the Israelites “they are entangled in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them” (Exod. 14:3). In other words, there’s no easy escape from wild places. When John the Baptist’s words reverberated in the heads of his followers, they must have realized there was no quick exit from the discomfort. Suddenly they had to face everything about themselves that was previously too scary or hidden to acknowledge—which could be the same benefit this patron saint continues to provide us.