

Well, you wouldn't say that John the Baptist was exactly a model for our typical 21st century church newcomer welcome committee, would you?

- A gentle and quiet hello – so as to not disturb the organ prelude.
- A visitor-friendly service bulletin – one with large print, page numbers, the service music nicely provided.
- A hospitality hour that is loud and generous and welcoming.
- Someplace nice for the kids.

All those things, and more, to welcome the visitor.

From the sounds of it, John the Baptist didn't have that kind of committee with him, when he preached out by the Jordan River. But he drew a crowd. And not only to hear him preach, but this crowd must have already known something of John, because they came to be baptized by him.

Baptism was nothing new to the Jewish religion. Ritual washing away of sin and uncleanness was practiced by many in John's day. What we understand of the Essene community from the days of John the Baptist and Jesus indicates that *daily* washing away of sins was an important part of their piety and religious practice.

If you have occasion to visit the Holy Land you can see dozens and dozens of ancient sites with what look very much like American protestant baptisteries.

We don't know who the people were who came out to the wilderness to be baptized by John. But they would have traveled quiet a distance, and most of them by foot, to stand out in the heat of the wilderness and listen to him preach and to be baptized.

John's opening words were not, "we're so happy that you choose to worship with us today."

"Well, well, well. You bunch of hypocrites!" Those were John's words of welcome. *"Who told you that it was time to straighten up and fly right?"*

You can imagine the looks they would have given each other. Some of them probably began to mutter under their breaths:

“Now just hold on there, fella. We’re devout Jews. We’re children of Abraham we’ve got the covenant, the Temple, and all that. You can’t talk to us that way. Save it for the Greeks or the Romans. They’re the pagans, after all.”

John was ready for them, almost before they’d drawn a breath.

“Oh shut up! I’m going to scream if you keep going on about ‘Abraham’s children! Abraham’s children!’ Enough with ‘Abraham’s children’ already! God isn’t interested in your family tree, or your denominational tree. If God want more life-less, motion-less, emotion-less people like you, he’d make more of Abraham’s children out of those rocks you’re standing on!

You would think that people couldn’t have gotten out of there fast enough. Most people don’t go to listen to a preacher in order to get insulted. But Luke doesn’t tell us that people ran away. Instead, they responded to John with a simple question: *What then should we do?*

What an incredibly gutsy question. Here they are, confronted by this wild man who calls them names, questions their motives and insults their religious identity. And they ask him, *what then should we do?*

What might he say? Sell everything you own, and give the money to the poor? Put on sackcloth and ashes, and fast for forty days? Leave your fishing boats, and follow me? Given his tone and attitude, why ask him such an open-ended question? Who knows what he might say? What if he tells us to pool our money together and open a clinic and a hospice for those poor guys who have leprosy? What will we do if he wants us to start giving food to the people who are too poor to buy their own?

What then should we do? John is asked that question three different times. Once by the entire crowd, once again by some tax collectors who had come to be baptized, and finally by some soldiers who were present.

The same question, three times. From different parts of the crowd. But pretty much the same surprising answer each time.

For all the harangue and chastising of the crowd that John had just finished, he had a very simple response to their question.

Be generous.

If you've got more clothes than you need, and there's someone who is cold – give them one of your extra coats. If you've got more food than you need to eat, and there's someone who is hungry – give them something to eat. That was it. No fire, no brimstone. Just – be generous.

Can you imagine how the tax collectors must have been shaking in their sandals when they asked: *Teacher, what should we do?*

These guys were despised! They were Jews who had 'sold out' to the Romans. The tax collectors in those days purchased the right to collect certain taxes or tolls from the Romans. They had to 'pre-pay' the taxes – up front. Then they were at liberty to actually collect any amount they wanted – of course that amount would have been *more* than they had already paid to the Romans. Tax collectors in Israel in those days were collaborators with the enemy. Traitors, in the eyes of many.

So who knew what John might say. Give back all the money that you over-collected! Quit your worthless, corrupt job! Find something honest to do for a living!

John had a very simple response to their question.

Be honest.

You know what the taxes are. Don't cook the books to line your own pockets. You know what you are supposed to collect. So - collect them.

That was it. No fire, no brimstone. Just – be honest.

The soldiers must have been just as nervous as the tax collectors, maybe even more so. They had more to lose. Luke tells us that the tax collectors had come out with the crowd to be baptized. He doesn't say that about the soldiers. Like the tax collectors, these soldiers would have been Jews there weren't any Roman troops hanging around during those years. These would have probably been soldiers associated with the Temple authorities. Maybe they were there at the Jordan on assignment from the Temple, to check out John the Baptist. Maybe they were there under their own steam, just like everyone else.

One thing we do know about them, just like everyone else, they asked the same question: *What about us? What should we do?*

John had a very simple response to their question as well.

Be fair.

Don't take money away from people by being a bully, or by throwing your weight around, or by blackmailing them. You're soldiers. You've got your job to do. So just do it.

That was it. No fire, no brimstone. Just – be fair.

Seems kind of odd, doesn't it. All that drama, all the talk about broods of vipers, and axes being ready to chop down trees that don't bare good fruit.

And John tells soldiers to be nice. He tells tax collectors to tell the truth. And he tells everyone to share.

Sounds kind of 'weak' doesn't it, for someone is supposed to be teaching us a thing or two during Advent. Someone whose supposed to be *preparing the way of the Lord*.

It depends, I suppose, on the kind of Messiah you're expecting.

You might want the kind of Messiah that's going to kick the Romans back to Italy where they belong. You might want the kind of Messiah that's going to sweep in with armies of angels and put your country on the top of the world, right where you know it belongs. If that's the kind of Messiah that you're expecting, then you probably don't want to hear a message about being nice, about not lying, and about sharing.

But maybe you're expecting a different kind of Messiah. Maybe you're waiting for the arrival of a utterly helpless and completely vulnerable baby. Maybe you're living in hope for a Messiah who will open your heart and your mind to all the freedom, all the riches, and all the blessings that God has in mind for your soul.

We're almost there. It seems like it's been a long time getting to this place. It's just a few more days, and we'll see which type of Messiah God has in mind for us.