

A Voice in the Wilderness

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With today's non-stop news cycle, social media, and the constant rhetoric all around, I had to pull the plug. Especially now as we find ourselves in the days before Easter. I keep thinking about John the Baptist, that prophetic voice in the wilderness announcing the coming of Jesus.



The Bible tells us that before John was born, an angel of the Lord visited his father, Zacharias, and said:

⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

(Luke 1:16-17 NIV)

I know from reading scripture that the world at that time was just as chaotic and filled with sin as it is now. So, how did John's voice rise above the noise? How did he gain attention and get people to listen? Probably because his message was urgent as he told people to pay attention and to prepare. To make a path for the coming Lord.

John lived in the wilderness before emerging as a prophet. Here was this impoverished, wild-looking man who ate locusts that he smeared with honey so he could get it down. He wore a cloak made of camel hair tied at his waist with a leather belt. We can only imagine that his hair was tangled and unkept, and he was probably covered with dust. Yet, as smelly, and scary looking as he might have been, people were drawn to him because of what he had to say.

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

(Matthew 3:1-2)

Wow, “repent” is a really strong word. Perhaps we find it incredible today that such a straightforward pronouncement would cause people to stop and take notice. I'd venture to say that many today would find the word "repent" offensive. Harsh. Accusatory. Insulting.

John was telling people that they needed to make a change. He wasn't just telling them to feel sorry for their sin but to turn away from it and go in a different direction. It was an urgent matter. This repentance was something they must do at once to be ready for the Messiah's arrival.

Not only did John tell people to repent, but to confess their sins and be baptized. He was calling for people to recognize they were on the wrong path, reminding them of the faith of their childhood. To the values they'd learned from their ancestors. He espoused that their actions

mattered. They were to be faithful to their spouse, to care about others, to be generous, and to serve one another.

We learn later in Matthew's story that John's ministry was quite successful. People were coming out of Jerusalem and all of Judea to hear his message and to be baptized. Many that heard were changed in their hearts and made a public confession of their sin – they demonstrated by their actions that they were preparing for the coming of God. Some of them became John's disciples helping to spread the message.

When the religious people of their day came around to hear what John was preaching, he called them a Brood of Vipers! Ouch. Talk about stepping on toes. These were the church leaders, the people who proclaimed their faithfulness to God. These were people that went to church. They said their prayers where others could hear them. They thought they were righteous because they followed the laws. Yet, they often misinterpreted the law and were hypocritical in their practices of faith.

Does this sound like any Christians we know today? Wait, does it sound like me?

Sadly, at times, yes!

In some of my recent research and writing, I've come across some pretty depressing information about our Christian faith. By simply peering inside our weekly church services, it should not surprise us that America is steadily becoming less Christian and less religiously observant.

In the last few decades, the image of the Christian faith has suffered a major setback. Of non-Christian young people who were surveyed:

- 38 % have a “bad impression” of present-day Christianity. (Barna)

Through their research, the Barna Group discovered that Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against – for what they oppose rather than what they are for.[\[1\]](#)

Why?

In national surveys with young people, Barna found that the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are:

- Anti-homosexual (91%)
- Judgmental (87 %)
- Hypocritical (85%)

When outsiders claim that we are un-Christian, it is a perception that we are not acting like Jesus. They quickly conclude that modern-day Christianity no longer seems Christian – we are not like Christ. Perhaps we should not be surprised that 75% of youth who profess to be Christian leave the church after high school. (Pew)

Regardless of how people inside or outside of the church *feel* about the word “repent” today, it is the first word of the gospel – the Good News. Pastor David Guzik of *Enduring Word* points out the following in his writing:

- **Repent** was the *first word* of John the Baptist’s gospel (Matthew 3:1-2).
- **Repent** was the *first word* of Jesus’ gospel (Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:14-15).
- **Repent** was the *first word* in the preaching ministry of the twelve disciples (Mark 6:12).
- **Repent** was the *first word* in the preaching instructions Jesus gave to His disciples after His resurrection (Luke 24:46-47).
- **Repent** was the *first word* of exhortation in the first Christian sermon (Acts 2:38).
- **Repent** was the *first word* in the mouth of the Apostle Paul through his ministry (Acts 26:19-20).

As we enter Holy Week, let us prepare our hearts for the coming of our Lord and Savior. We know that we are an imperfect people living in a world filled with sin. Let us open our hearts and our arms to those around us who may look and perhaps even smell like John the Baptist. We are Christians – God’s children. We need to act like it.

Let us repent, confess our sins, and by our actions, point others towards Jesus.

Amen.

[1] Kinnaman David and Lyons, Gabe, “*Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*,” (Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 26.