

During WW II, one of the elite units were the paratroopers – the airborne. They usually parachuted into their next assignment. That jump could not have been made if not for a smaller unit of specialists who preceded the paratroops and jumped in several hours ahead of the main body. This small unit was called the Pathfinders. Their job was to go ahead of the paratroops and mark the planned drop zones with markers and beacons.

In today's Gospel, we are re-introduced to a familiar yet strange figure; a man who was perhaps the greatest "pathfinder" of all time – John the Baptist. Today's reading sets us at the beginning of John's ministry, when he was in the desert and the Word of God came to him. John is said to be the last of the prophets from Scripture, but who was he? Why was he in the desert? Why did he seem to act so strangely?

Well, there's much we'll probably never know about John's personal life, like many other Scripture figures. But that's not really what's important about John the Baptist. John is important not for his speech, his dress or where he lived; he is important because he points the way to the Savior of humanity. And the reason he did so was not because without him no one would have heard of Jesus; it was because his actions are to serve as a model for all Christians.

How can a man who seems so different from us be a model? What is the path that he points to? John can serve as a model for all of us as we continue to prepare for the birth of Jesus, and he does this in three ways.

First, John models *relationships* for us. At first glance, this might sound a bit strange, because basically, he was a hermit. But the relationship he shows us, the path he points to is one of self-effacement, of true humility. For John, it was never about him – it was about helping others go closer to God. John showed this by not building up his following or claiming to be the Messiah. In fact, when asked if he was the one the people were waiting for, instead of claiming this title, he simply stated that he was not worthy to unfasten the sandal strap of the true Christ.

John the Baptist shows us that by surrendering our lives to God, by making God the foundation of our lives, we will have peace – a peace that can be shared with others. Living out our lives in each grace-filled moment God gives us, will change us and the people we live and work with. After all, who do we believe is coming into the world? Was John

pointing to a celebrity or a powerful executive? No – he was pointing to the one who *was* forgiveness, compassion and service. Those are the hallmarks of authentic relationship; hallmarks we need to keep in view as we move through the hectic days of this season.

Human relationship is about sharing. This Advent, like past Advents, we are all called to share a part of ourselves with others, to give away a part of our lives to someone who needs us. This might involve a gift of our time or our support; it might involve asking someone who has been away from church to return, or, it could involve healing old family hurts.

John the Baptist's connection with Jesus was more than a family connection. He was a bridge to the Lord, a path over which we can pass to get to Jesus. And the method for crossing, for coming closer to the Lord, begins with the second element of John's modeling for us, that of *repentance*.

The Gospel tells us that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The repentance John had in mind was not so much being sorry for particular sins, as it was about a *conversion* – a transformation from our old life of worry, wins and losses, to a new life of dependence upon God's loving care for us.

Another clue to the kind of repentance John was preaching can be found in the place he was when the Word of God came to him – he had gone into the desert. The desert is a metaphor for being alone with God, for emptying ourselves. John wasn't in the desert because he enjoyed sleeping under sagebrush and stones; he was there because he was searching for God.

Our desert is the quiet place in our lives where we encounter God. We go into the desert when we set aside our need to control, or to be right, or to keep a tight grasp on our possessions. We ourselves must take the first step to go into our desert, to reach out to God, to trust in God. When we do that in prayer, or worshipping God in church or receiving the sacraments, we will see mountains brought low, valleys filled and winding paths made straight. For many of us, it is hard to believe in God's power to work in us until we get ourselves out of the way. Once we experience this, we will know the power of repentance John was talking about.

