



His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville

December 10, 2023, Second Sunday of Advent

11:00 AM, St. Theresa Church

“Are You A Forerunner of Jesus?”

(This is the text of the sermon as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene:* Time constraints have not permitted a thorough proofreading. Therefore, there may be some errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Sitting in Midway airport Friday, awaiting my flight back to St. Louis, after visiting a gravely ill friend in Chicago, I heard, of all things, that Bing Crosby is STILL dreaming of a White Christmas followed by this announcement. “Catholic Mass will be celebrated at 11:00 in the interfaith chapel. This Mass is in honor of The Blessed Virgin Mary on her feast of the Immaculate Conception. All are welcome.” As I found myself wondering what the travelers with no religious background made of this peculiar announcement, the young man sitting next to me, assuming that I was a Catholic, said in a questioning voice, “You Catholics believe that Joseph was not the father of Jesus, and that Jesus was conceived immaculately in Mary’s womb?” I was hesitant to attempt to explain, just as my flight was about to board, that the Immaculate Conception does not refer to the conception of Jesus, but to the conception of Mary. The man, like many Catholics was confused. The feast celebrates that Mary was born “full of grace” in anticipation of her “yes” to the messenger of God asking her to go on a divine adventure by becoming the mother of Jesus. As I boarded my flight, I wondered how many Catholics who participated in the airport Mass also erroneously thought the celebration was about the virgin birth of Jesus.

There is a famous charcoal drawing by Leonardo da Vinci in the National Gallery in London of a very young Mary and her mother, Anne sitting together with John (later known as “the Baptist”) and his younger kinsman, Jesus playing on their laps.

The tranquil beauty of Mary's face conveys the spiritual reality that she is indeed full of grace. The drawing is inspired by the gospel of Luke which says Mary and Elizabeth were kinswomen.

[Matthew, Mark, and John do not say this. That Jesus and John are relatives is never mentioned again and when John baptizes Jesus, there is no indication that they are related].

Indeed, After John baptizes Jesus, he is imprisoned by King Herod Antipas. Before he is beheaded, after the Dance of Salome, the king's daughter, (influenced by her angry mother, Herodias), John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask Him: Are you the one who is to come or are we to look for another?

St. John the baptizer, who we meet in Mark, 1, 1-8 this morning was the forerunner of Jesus, the one who went before him, announcing his presence and alerting the Jewish people to repent because the long-expected Messiah is near. On this Second Sunday of Advent, you and I are challenged to ask ourselves: Are we, like John, living each day of Advent as forerunners of Jesus? How are we preparing the way of the Lord? How are we a voice of one crying out in the desert of our secular world: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight His paths so that you may worthily celebrate the Christmas Holidays?

John the Baptist is an utterly unique character in the New Testament. After Mark's shocking announcement "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," John comes roaring out of the desert wilderness like a wild man. He is scantily dressed in the skin of a camel held around his body by a leather belt, clothing intended to suggest that he repents Isiah, the prophet.

The Jewish people knew a prophet was someone who boldly declared religious truth, politically incorrect, not afraid to announce challenges people did not want to hear, often issuing warning of impending judgment. When John came out of the desert, there had not been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. Then, without warning he emerges from the harsh lands near the Dead Sea, wearing the rough, dark camel hair garb of the poor, proclaiming a single alarming message: "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"

John's appearance initially stirred more interest than the appearance of Jesus. In fact, in some of the early literature of the first century, more attention is given to John the Baptist than Jesus because they did not expect prophets anymore.

Most of the poor in Jesus' day ate fish, figs, and barley loaves. But John was so poor that he ate locusts for protein, probably drying them and adding some wild field honey to sweeten them enough to make them digestible. John's appearance and lifestyle made it clear that he was not beholden to anyone in the royal court or the Jewish temple. He makes his way to the river Jordan offering to the people from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He preached, "There is One coming after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John said, if you truly repent of your sins, you will do good works that show your repentance. After John baptizes

Jesus, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended like a dove on Him and a voice was heard saying: 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Again, we are challenged to ask ourselves: Are we, like John, living each day of Advent as forerunners of Jesus? In what way are we preparing the way of the Lord. How are we a voice of one crying out in the desert of our secular world: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths so that we may worthily celebrate Christmas Holy Days?

Have we been praying more and reading the Scriptures more? have we made a commitment to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation before Christmas? If we need it, have we sought out the marriage counseling, alcohol abuse, or drug abuse treatment? Have we set aside time to visit the sick and the homebound in our parish? Have we decided to resist the temptation to buy extravagant gifts and instead to provide financial support to those in need, such as hospitals that care for children suffering from cancer?

It is works such as these that make us like John the Baptist, forerunners of Jesus.

Have we visited the graves of our loved ones and prayed for the dead? Have we sought to be reconciled with a family member, friend, or coworker with whom we have been quarreling for a long time? Do we have an Advent wreath in our homes to remind us to prepare a place for Christ? Are you planning to teach your children or grandchildren the TRUE story of St. Nicholas? Do you have a nativity scene to inspire your children and teach them the meaning of the story of the birth of Christ? Do our Christmas cards depict the birth of Christ, or do they say, "Happy Holidays", "Seasons Greetings", celebrating nothing more than the winter solstice?

It is works such as these that make us like John the Baptist, forerunners of Jesus.

Have we taken the time to read seriously about Russia's terrifying war against the people of Ukraine and the incomprehensible war between Israel and Hamas in the very land where Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace taught us: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you!" Have we considered praying the family Rosary for peace? Have you made a serious effort to understand the difficult and complex issues that are exacerbating the political, social, racial, sexual, economic, and religious divides that are adding to the polarization of our United States?

It is works such as these that make us like John the Baptist, forerunners of Jesus.

Have we considered resuming or beginning the practice of morning and night prayers on our knees?

Advent Actions as simple as these can make us, like John the Baptist, true forerunners of Christ. Then, on Christmas Day, we may hear the words spoken by the Holy Spirit to Jesus:

**"You are my Son, the Beloved,
you are my Daughter, the Beloved,
with you I am well pleased."**

*“You are my Son, the Beloved,
you are my Daughter, the Beloved,
with you I am well pleased.”*

**Praise be Jesus Christ.
Both Now and forever. AMEN!**