



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE SECOND
SUNDAY OF
ADVENT**

DECEMBER 8, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Our readings from scripture each Sunday are prescribed by a lectionary, and specifically the Revised Common Lectionary, which we share with the other liturgical churches. The theme of the readings is roughly determined by season. So in this season of Advent, the readings reflect our anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Christ on Christmas. No surprise there.

But it might spin our heads around when we focus on John the Baptist. John the Baptist, after all, was a cousin and contemporary of Jesus. He even was something of a competitor of Jesus as a prophet. Indeed, a community of his followers still exists in Iraq, and even in Islam he is considered a pious prophet. But, still, why would we hear about his exploits that took place well after the birth of Jesus when we are anticipating the birth of Jesus?

This may sound like heresy this time of year, but we celebrate Jesus birth only because of who Jesus was in his adult life. Had his disciples not realized and embraced that he was divine and the long-expected Messiah, we would still be celebrating Hannukah and Saturnalia and the Winter Solstice. John the Baptist was Jesus' herald. And he could announce Jesus only because he had an inkling of who Jesus was, what that meant.

We typically say "these are worst of times, and the best of times." But for Judea and the people of Israel, when John the Baptist roamed the desert with his calls to repent, these were just the worst of times. Period. Full stop. The great Maccabean revolt that had restored Israel as a nation for the last time until 1948 was mere history. Their land now was occupied by the Romans and governed by an unsympathetic king. The religious leaders typically collaborated with the Roman rulers at the expense of the general populace. The rich landowners exploited the poor and seized their land. The rich became richer; the poor became poorer, and wealth was concentrated in fewer hands. Taxation by the Romans and the Temple was demanding. The Pharisees imposed increasingly strict and detailed rules and interpretations of the Torah, the Law. And then ignored them themselves. Hypocrisy, nepotism, and corruption were rampant in the Temple and among religious leaders. The time of the great prophets, who had called the people of Israel

back to God, was long past. But still the people of Israel retained a glimmer of hope.

They knew their one true God was faithful and never would abandon them. They recalled God's liberating them from slavery in Egypt and granting them land to form a nation. They remembered the return from the exile to Babylon, and the building of the second Temple. They studied the prophecies that a great king and liberator would emerge from the line of the great King David, who would be the Messiah.

So in the midst of their daily travails, they waited for and yearned for and hoped for and prayed for the day the Messiah would come.

And, you know what? He did. His kingdom and conquest would not be earthly, as they had expected. Instead, he would conquer evil and liberate humanity from death. But in that dark, discouraging, perplexing time, God would come to them, not in a burning bush or flash of lightening, or clap of thunder. Not on a mountain top or in a great palace. Not with a royal entourage and powerful army, but with a life that would show them the way. A message that would restore the Law to its foundation of love of God and neighbor. A sacrifice that would defy their lofty hopes of earthly power and might, but assure them eternal life.

What possibly might tell us on this eighth day of December in the two-thousandth and twenty-fourth day of our Lord as we confront an uncertain future at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Destin, Florida?