

Isaiah comforts the afflicted, speaking tender words to exiles returning to Jerusalem; John afflicts the comfortable who are exiled from the ways of God. Isaiah declares that Israel has paid double for its sins; John calls Israel to repent of its sins. Isaiah announces the good news of God's deliverance to Jerusalem; John announces to Jerusalem the advent of God's judgment. Get ready!

There is no quick escape from the discomfort of John's words. John wasn't preaching in the center of Jerusalem by the Temple wall, but on the periphery of power. As Rowan Williams observes, *The church is always renewed from the edges rather than from the center. Renewal tends not to come from central planning. It was St Francis who went to Pope Innocent III, not the other way around.*

To be renewed, the city-dwellers took the initiative. They walked away from the Temple center, away from the comforts and convenience of home, away from the beauty of their suburban gardens. They trekked into the wilderness—a deserted, inhospitable area where there is no food or water, the haunt of wild animals, demons, and death—to be confronted by a mad prophet! Why would they do this?

Something about John worked on the people. He told them their lives were messed up more than they ever realized. The wilderness without mirrored the wasteland within. Their souls were as arid as the desert. The lone voice of John crying in the wilderness challenged the cries of the conflicting voices in their heads: pay attention to the word of the Lord.

To approximate the experience of those first century folk who went out to hear John, Peter Marty says, we 21st century folk might take a field trip to an anechoic (a-nuh-kow-uhk) (literally “without echo”) chamber. For \$600 you can pay to be alone in one at The Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis. Few visitors last longer than 20 minutes.

The experience is highly disconcerting. You suddenly must endure a confrontation with yourself. In the silence of solitude, hearing your own heart beating, blood flowing, bones grinding, lungs expanding, you are confronted by realities every bit as terrifying as anything encountered in the wilderness.

Just as John's hearers suddenly faced everything about themselves that was previously too scary or hidden to acknowledge, so the call to repentance confronts us with the disorder of our souls, undone by fears and secrets long denied.

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (as it has been written in Isaiah the prophet: “Look, I am sending my messenger before your face, who will set your way in order.”* (Joel Marcus' translation of Mark 1:1-2).

*The way* is the central discipleship motif of Mark's gospel. *The way*, the way of Jesus, is to become our way. John the Baptizer knows this requires repentance, a reordering

of our priorities, our values, our passions, in order that we might walk in the way of self-denial, something that does not come to us easily or naturally.

Everyday life—the taken-for-granted way we conduct our lives—involves going along with the tried-and-true customs, and doing so because these customs give us a reassuring sense that the world is rooted in something dependable.

There can be a danger in following such customs, however, for in addition to providing us with a secure, dependable way of coping with the world, they may also lead to a life governed by temporal cares and mundane satisfactions.

*Sacred Attunement* is the title of Michael Fishbane's recent interpretation of Judaism. He describes a "covenant life" in which we no longer take the world around us for granted, in which we receive all that is as gift. To repent is to turn from a self-centered life, a life out of tune with the divine harmonies, to a life that mirrors the self-giving love of God.

A life of giving as God gives, to the extent that we entrust ourselves to it, to the extent we embody this sort of giving in our relationship to others, is a life lived in sacred attunement, a life of radical kindness. When our ways mirror the holy way of God, the desert blooms, the soul becomes a well-watered garden.