

All of Judea, Jerusalem, and the region around the Jordan were going out to the Judean desert where John was baptizing in the Jordan River. The Jordan was not just a convenient river that John chose to use because it was there. The Jordan River and the desert that surrounded it were very important symbols for the Jews. Most importantly, it was on the east side of the Jordan the Israelites ended their forty years of wandering in the desert. Moses died there. Joshua then led the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land. In connection with the exodus, the Jordan represented the fulfillment of God's plan to bring Israel into the geographical promised land of Canaan.

John's presence in that area, preaching, baptizing, and proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand was a sign that an even greater promise was about to be fulfilled. The long-awaited messiah was on his way to definitively restore the broken relationship between God and his chosen people. That would happen with the one who was following behind John. John was merely a forerunner, preparing people for Jesus who was coming after him. John's words and actions in the desert and at the Jordan were raising messianic expectations to a fever pitch. It is understandable that the people were flocking to the desert to see him.

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That was the cry in the wilderness that drew people out to John. What does the word repent mean? One dictionary says it is to feel or express regret for one's wrongdoing or sin. Okay...but that is really a definition of contrition. The classic scriptural definition of repent is based on the Greek and Hebrew words. In Greek, repent means to change one's mind. In Hebrew the meaning is more intense: it means to radically change the direction of one's life. Remember last Sunday's second reading? It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep...let us throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." "Repent! Change your life now...because the messiah is coming and the kingdom of heaven which we have been praying for for centuries is at hand. Repent now so we are not caught off guard and unprepared. Repent now so that the gates of the kingdom of heaven will not be shut against us." All of that is in the background of the Baptist's cry.

Some people probably went out to John with the intention of receiving his baptism as a sign of their heartfelt decision to change their lives and put on the armor of light. Others probably went out with open hearts and minds to hear what John had to say and then decided whether or not to accept his words. Yet others probably went out for the spectacle of seeing such a wild and crazy guy eating bugs out in the desert. Then there were two groups of men whose purpose may have been more sinister: the Pharisees and Sadducees. They represented the established religious authority in Judea and they were out there to judge and probably condemn John.

Those are reasonable explanations for why everyone seems to be going out into the desert but there was probably something even deeper at work. When the Pharisees and Sadducees showed up, John called them a brood of vipers. What is a viper? It is a poisonous snake such as a rattlesnake. John wasn't just trying to antagonize them, he

was calling them out for what they were. He is implying something that Jesus will state more directly later on, which is that the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were poisoning the people entrusted to their care. John's preaching is the antidote to the Pharisees' and Sadducees' venom. And people were responding to it. They recognized that John was teaching them something different and truer than what they had been offered for centuries. They were flocking out to a deserted place to hear John and many of them responded to his call for repentance. Their recognition of the truth in John's preaching was probably the work of the Holy Spirit working through John and giving his words and actions a level of authority that John could not have had on his own. And the truth of John's words were probably amplified by his reference for the greater person who was on his way. Again, this was very different from what the people saw in the Pharisees who were very concerned about their own dignity and receiving honors. John was not involved in self-promotion; he was there to prepare the way of the Lord.

What can we take away from this? First, if we want a deeper encounter with God, we have to make room for silence because that is something else that the desert represents. Jesus himself gives us that example because he frequently went out to a deserted place to pray. Second, we have to identify whose voices we are listening to because many of the voices filling our heads are pure poison, even if they might sound good on the surface. Third, we have to acknowledge that our sins stand between us and the kingdom of heaven. We have to repent of those sins which doesn't just mean feeling sorry for them; we have to make a firm commitment to change our lives and get back on the right track. The season of Advent is the perfect time to do that through the sacrament of reconciliation. The fourth thing is that we have to remember that reconciliation is not just about contrition, penance, repentance, and absolution. It is about forgiveness and healing. Sin wounds us by hurting our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is broken, our relationships with each other will also be broken. Do we have the courage to acknowledge our sins and broken relationships and ask Jesus to heal us? That is exactly what he came to do.