

There once was a man who had strange attire, and people could recognize him from his hairy cloak and the leather belt around his waist. His diet was unusual, and he spent much time in the wilderness away from city life. He was the messenger of God and had a close relationship with Him.

When he did go into the city, he was known to speak hard words to those in power. He spoke to the king and rebuked him for his ungodliness. The wife of the king wanted him dead. He was courageous in speaking the Word of God to those who would listen, even if they did give him a funny look. He prepared the way of the Lord by destroying the idols that were rampant in his

This man was not without his low points. In a lonely moment, he asked the Lord if what He was doing was worth the trouble. Nonetheless, the Lord gave him words of encouragement, and even showed him his successor whose name means salvation and his successor would be much stronger in spirit than this man.

At this point, you must be thinking that I'm talking about John the Baptist, the man who is featured in our Gospel text today. I'm actually talking about Elijah the prophet in the Old Testament. He is the man of God featured in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. He calls Israelite royalty to repentance: King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and King Ahaziah. When Elijah intercepts some of King Ahaziah's messengers and they return to the King, he recognizes Elijah by his messengers telling him about his hairy cloak and his leather belt.

The name Elijah means "My God is Yahweh." That was an important distinction because for many people in his time, their god was Baal, a false god who was supposedly the god of fertility. Elijah appointed Elisha as his successor, and Elisha was given a double portion of Elijah's spirit, and Elisha's name means God is my salvation. This is not entirely different than Jesus whose name means Yahweh saves and who is the mightier one of whom John the Baptist prophesies.

The Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi, and the last words before the New Testament are this: **“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”** Jesus says 3. John the Baptist “...is Elijah who is to come.”

We might wonder, why Elijah? Why not Moses or Noah or Abraham or hey, maybe even Jonah? Elijah spoke to a nation who were at a turning point. It's either Yahweh or Baal, not both. Elijah challenged the people asking them, **“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If [Yahweh] is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”** In many ways, after Elijah, all that was left was the crying, the die was cast, and about one hundred years later Assyria would invade the northern kingdom and it would never be restored to its former glory.

**“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”** John’s world wasn’t perfect either. It, too, was at a turning point. Are you going to follow the true God or blend in with the Romans who worship whatever god is convenient for them at the time? Are you going to listen to Yahweh, or are you going to make a papier-mâché imitation of Him out of your own rules and regulations? Unlike for Elijah, Baal may not have been the false god of John’s day, but any number of idols sprung up and became the temptation of the day.

Different puppets deceive people, but it’s still the same puppet master, Satan himself, the father of lies. We may not worship Baal, but the god of fertility is still alive and well. Perhaps people aren’t worried about having lots of livestock and kids these days, but we’re toasting to momma dollar and papa dollar and we want them to make a family real fast.

We’re in the time of the season that has become overly commercialized, and the day after Thanksgiving in which we are to give thanks and be content for what we have, we get up early the next morning to buy more on Black Friday. The Baal of our day is the materialism that tells us we need to have as much as we want, no matter the cost. The Baal of our day is the television and Internet advertisers who tell us more, more, more. No wonder the holidays are a season of stress and anxiety, there’s no way we can live up to the Hallmark picture perfect Christmas that’s been on our television even starting early November.

John the Baptist still calls to us even today. **“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ”** The straight paths are that of a man who lives in the wilderness subsisting on a diet of bugs and honey. The asceticism and simplicity of his lifestyle sets the tone for the Advent season, and it’s this self-denial that throws a wrench into the Christmas industrial complex that wants our minds to be subsumed into worries of money, abundance, and excess.

Why bother? What difference will it make? Like Elijah, like John the Baptist, we need to understand we are at a turning point. That’s what’s Advent is all about. That’s what repentance means; it is a turning point. The Church in the West has been dwindling. Sure, we can blame the government. We can blame the public schools. We can blame Hollywood or the skewed News Media. But we need to take seriously the words of the Apostle Peter, **“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God”** Let it begin with me.

For far too long have let the Baal of materialism stand as an idol in our homes alongside our crosses and Bibles, and the Church at large has suffered

because of this. Are you more worried about your checking account or hell? Has your inability to say no to work prevented you from regularly attending worship? Have the financial demands of your lifestyle been to the detriment of your ability to spend time in God's Word to teach your family or to enrich yourself? Students, have worries over the upcoming exams eclipsed you to skip church, devotions, or Bible study? Parents, do you worry more about your child reaching her mid-twenties without a bachelor's degree than her reaching her mid-twenties and not having a faithful church in her new town in which she is a regular, involved member?

Advent is a season of repentance, and John the Baptist cries to you in the wilderness to smash your idols just like Elijah slaughtered the 450 prophets of Baal at the brook Kishon. Today, John is calling your faith to be a life-changer, not something that is to be picked up only when other more important things don't get in the way. Like Elijah, 2. John the Baptist calls you to turn from Baal.

**“I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. He is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing.”** John the Baptist calls you to a better way because he foresees the mightier one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie.

This mightier one is no other than Jesus Christ. This Advent we wait for the birth of Christ at Christmas, but more than that, we wait for His continued arrival in our lives as He works in our lives through Word and Sacrament.

Ironically, the scribes accused Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, literally, Jesus is possessed by the spirit of Baal, the false god. They said Jesus was in line with Baal! Of course, the opposite was true. He then gives a parable of a strong man not being able to be defeated unless a stronger man—a mightier man—comes to tie up the strong man.

Jesus is that mightier man who is not only more worthy than John the Baptist, but He is stronger than Satan himself, the puppet master of all false gods. To rob Satan's house means that all of the devil's false promises become fulfilled in Jesus.

That doesn't mean that God is promising you worldly riches in this life. You're not promised that your kids will remain in the faith. You're not promised that you'll get the raise. You're not promised that you'll pass all your exams. You may not get that present you want for Christmas. Indeed, despite Elijah's faithfulness, Israel was still destroyed.

John said, **“I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** Through His death and resurrection, Jesus gives us something better than a Christmas bonus, triple overtime, or straight As. This mightier man rips open the gates of heaven for me and for you, and **“has blessed us... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”** No matter how much money

your household made this year or the promises of your career track when you graduate, your riches lay primarily in belonging to the mightier one who has tied up Satan and makes you part of His family through baptism. Your riches consist of the abundance of sins your Lord has washed from you. Your wealth consists of the community of believers here who are walking alongside you as pilgrims on the way preparing for the glories of the life to come even as we serve those around us in the between.

1. John the Baptist proclaims a stronger one. This Advent, consider what it might be like to follow the stronger one more wholly and fully. Consider how following Baal has let you down, and gather around the manger of the Christ-child who is taking care of you now even as He left everything to sacrifice Himself for you. **JOHN THE BAPTIST, LIKE ELIJAH, CALLS YOU TO TURN FROM BAAL TO THE STRONGER ONE.**