John the Baptist is one of the few biblical characters for whom we actually can recount some of the details of his life. What would you say about him if you were put on the spot? Lived in the wilderness? He wore camel hair and a leather belt? He ate locusts and honey? He was a fiery preacher? He baptized Jesus? Preachers for years on this Sunday have built a caricature of John that has perhaps outgrown reality and perhaps is a bit unkind. One preacher described John the Baptist as the crazy uncle who crashes the polite family Christmas dinner and overstays his welcome making everyone shift uncomfortably in their seat and avert their eyes. Christian author Barbara Brown Taylor called John the Baptist, “the Doberman pinscher of the gospel . . . this big old dog with a spiky collar.” Poor John.

Most preachers teach their congregations to dread the annual visit from John the Baptist like they dread other annual chores like going to the dentist or filing your taxes. Here comes John the Baptist with the bad news . . . let’s get it over with so we can move on to Christmas.

Luke is the only gospel writer who is kind to old John the Baptist. Luke does not even mention his strange clothing or unusual diet. Luke tells us John simply traveled the region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There is another place we can turn for an opinion of what John the Baptist was really like. We turn to the writings of a man named Josephus, who was a Jewish scholar and an early historian and whose works have been well preserved. Josephus provides some of the most accurate records of Jesus’s time, outside the bible. Josephus calls John the Baptist “pious” and “persuasive.” Josephus says John’s preaching “profoundly stirred people” or even “excited to the utmost.” He says Herod thought the people would do anything John asked them to do so he “thought it would be best to execute him before any real trouble was caused.”

Luke and Josephus’s accounts of John make me feel like we have given him a bad reputation by focusing too much on his clothing choices and his inclination to eat bugs. John the Baptist, shown in a different light, is not some wilderness freak trying to steal our Christmas joy, but rather an extremely compelling and persuasive biblical figure, worth listening to still today. John was not trying to prevent the Jesus Christmas train from arriving, but simply to call peoples’ attention to it so they could prepare for his coming. Quite polite of him, come to think of it!

John’s version of “preparing the way” did not have a thing to do with decking the halls, trimming the tree, or decorating cookies. Too bad for us, we are quite good at those things. If those were the measure of preparedness, then John the Baptist would have to be impressed with all of the “preparing” we are up to these days. Unfortunately, John’s preparation plans have to do with interiors not exteriors. Josephus says John was preaching about practicing virtue, exercising righteousness toward each other, and piety towards God—and he was asking people to be baptized. John was interested in repentance, purity, righteousness, virtue, prayer, and devotion.
But it is Christmas and we do not have a lot of time for such things. And that is exactly why we need an annual visit from Uncle John calling us to pay attention to our hearts, our minds, our souls, our faith. John, if we will allow it, provides something of a spiritual tune up. He asks the questions no one else is bold enough to ask.

How is your faith these days?
   How is your prayer life?
      Are you reading the Bible?
         When was the last time you made sincere confession?
            Are you looking for God’s holiness around you?
                  Are you finding ways to serve God?
                     Are you living up to your calling?
                         Are you preparing the way?

Uncomfortable, important questions to be asked. Perhaps the people flocked to John the Baptist because they were hungry for someone to challenge them, to shake them up, to awaken them from their complacency in order that they might become more attuned, more spiritual, more virtuous people. Maybe we are all hungering for that. Someone to push us, someone to make us want to be better, someone to drive us towards important spiritual discoveries locked within our own hearts.

My friend Sara, in her writings this Advent, drew my attention to a recent interview of singer/songwriter and recent Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, James Taylor. In the interview, Taylor talks about the need in this day and age to “defend your time to have a long thought.” He says that “Rather than writing a song, I’m just the first person to hear [it].” For his newest album, Before This World, he sequestered himself in quiet isolation. In order to achieve the type of space Taylor says we need, he advised the audience, “You have to tolerate a little loneliness.”

I think John the Baptist is calling us into the wilderness in order that we might have some “long thoughts” about what is coming, about the unfolding of our lives, about God’s presence in the world, about how we are being called to change, to grow, to believe. Preparing the way requires work on our parts—to dust off that which is sinful, to polish that which has become tarnished in our hearts, to attune our eyes and ears to sights and sounds of the holy in our midst. Without this internal work, we will most certainly be unprepared for Christ’s coming.

While I was working in London, I used to finish the Christmas Day service and then head straight to Heathrow. I’d catch an afternoon flight to Minneapolis and arrive in time for Christmas dinner. I never minded the flight because it was the first time in a month I would have really sat down to rest. I would be mulling over the month of services and sermons and prayers. I would be excited about seeing my family and getting home. But for eight hours I was stuck in a seat with nothing to do but read, pray, nap, write, and maybe watch a movie. It was great. If only we could each be strapped in our chairs for eight hours between now and Christmas Day for the sole purpose of having some long thoughts—having some time for reflection, repentance, reevaluation, and prayer. John was calling the city dwellers away from their anxious, busy lives to retreat into the wilderness to seek after meaning, righteousness, and God’s own self.
W.H. Auden’s poem *For the Time Being* is something I could imagine coming from the mouth of John the Baptist. Hear it now as words calling us to prepare for life with Christ.

*He is the Way.*
*Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;*  
*You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.*
*Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;*  
*You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.*

*He is the Life.*
*Love Him in the World of the Flesh;*  
*And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*”

John is not preaching in order to hinder our way to the manger, but to help us know how to act once we get there. John the Baptist came, calling us to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—calling us to fill the valleys of our sins, make the hills of our regret low, make the crooked roads we have traveled straight, make the rough patches of our lives smooth.

John is not an angry and isolated man crying out in the wilderness. He is a wise prophet, forerunner of the Messiah, a compelling teacher, an effective preacher, a sage for the ages. John is calling us into the wilderness so we might retreat from the noise, the stress, the to-do lists and ponder the presence of God Almighty coming into our midst. Those “long thoughts” are gifts this time of year—balm for our weary souls. And you are far too busy to make that trip to the wilderness this year. Find a way to travel into that space—here’s one idea: set your alarm one day this week for an hour earlier than anyone else in your house will be up. Make a cup of coffee, light a candle, open a bible—read and pray and think and listen for the hour. Asking God to meet you and reveal to you what work of preparedness you are being called to do.

John’s annual visit should be a welcome visit for us as he comes to remind us that preparing for the season is not about the external decorations of Christmas but about the internal soul searching we have been asked to do in Advent. The bad news is we have work to do, but the good news . . . is coming soon.

Amen.