

Wednesday Reflection

Title: Keep *Incarnation* in Christmas

Date: December 7, 2025

ID: Second Sunday of Advent (A cycle)

Scripture: Matthew 3: 1-13

Text: John the Baptist takes center stage in the drama of salvation. John prepares us for the Incarnation, the feast of God-in-the-body, God-in-the flesh. Some believers imagine salvation as a disembodied, spiritual existence in heaven. This world becomes a temporary exile, a test, or a vale of tears. In this understanding of the faith, our bodies and the material side of existence become impediments to spiritual development. Then comes Advent and Christmas. Incarnation invites us back into this world, to the physical and material, to time and place. All life comes into play. The divine connects with our world so, through God, we enjoy communion with all reality and the entirety of life. This world, this life becomes the locus of salvation.

Whoever cut the Gospel into Sunday's reading did a disservice. They omitted the first words of chapter three, the phrase "In those days" (3:1). Matthew conveys a reminder of time and place, however, in more subtle ways.

- John's ministry occurs in the desert of Judea (3:1). Centuries before, Israel wandered in the wilderness, the desert, preparing to enter the Holy Land.
- John baptized in the Jordan River. Centuries had passed since God dried up the Jordan, so His people entered the Promised Land on dry land much like they crossed the Red Sea to escape slavery. (Josh. 3:13-17).
- The progress of salvation history slowed; prophecy went silent (1 Macc. 9:27). Four hundred years passed since Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet. Then, John dressed like Elijah as a sign of prophecy's renewal (compare 3:4 to 2 Kings 1:8).

All this signaled that God was intervening in this world anew. To meet God-in-the-flesh, John preached repentance, a complete turn to a new way of life. He calls us to bear good fruit, to perform actual signs of God's goodness and love. Please look at St. Paul's fruits of the Spirit for the transformation that should occur in us (Gal 5:22-23).

Matthew does not use Luke's literary devices to keep John's time separate from the Messiah's time. Matthew conveys continuity between John and Jesus. John's call to conversion (3:2) is exactly the Lord's (4:17). John's call to produce fruit (3:8) is much like the Lord's (7:15ff). John's broadside against the Pharisees and Sadducees uses the same invective as the Lord's (12:34). John's concern for the future of Abraham's children (3:9) echoes in the Lord's concern (8:11/12). We never hear John preach anything like the Beatitudes (5:1-12). But we must acknowledge the continuity. John was fiery; so was Jesus. Both call us to new life.

Matthew uses the term *kingdom of heaven* rather than *kingdom of God*. Scripture scholar Daniel Harrington says *heaven* is a Jewish substitute for *God* (p. 79, see Exodus 20:7). No one should interpret the expression to mean a disembodied, spiritualized existence. Harrington writes: "The 'kingdom of heaven' (a characteristically Matthean expression) refers to the fullness of God's power and presence that will be acknowledged by all creation" (p. 51). All creation! John prepares us for the Incarnation, God-in-the-flesh, God-in-this-world.