

Each and every December we hear the Advent preacher, John the Baptist. And I have to say that it's a little like getting socks for Christmas. If that's all you're getting, you're going to be pretty disappointed. You need socks. But what kid ever puts them on his Christmas list? And after Christmas, when children compare what they got with each other, no kid will say, "Hey, I got socks!" They are always opened first, along with the underwear, because what a letdown if the last present to be opened is a pair of socks. But kids know that when they get socks, the good stuff is still to come. And so no one says, "Socks? Yech!" They say, "Thank you," because they know that what's coming will bring great excitement.

That's kind of how we look at John. Just like socks, he comes every December. We don't get upset and say, "John the Baptist? Yech!" We don't get overly excited about him, but we don't mind listening to him because we know what's coming after him. Now, if he was all there is to Christmas, that would be a great big letdown. But he's only the Advent preacher. The Baby Jesus comes later. And so, as with socks, we put up with John because the best is still to come.

I imagine that all of us are wearing socks this morning. They probably match the rest of our outfit. But even if they don't, no one will care, because we do not hold up our socks for everyone to see. Others notice the clothing we wear, and our shoes, but not our socks.

And that's John. We are not clothed with him, but with Christ in Holy Baptism. We are Christians, not Johnians. When people see us, they do not see John; they see Jesus. But John is there, just like our socks. They must go on before the shoes. John's preaching of repentance comes before Christ. The Law must come first, or the shoes of the Gospel will not fit.

Our text tells us that John is the "*voice of one crying in the wilderness.*" You remember that when God led His people out of slavery in Egypt, He led them into such a wilderness. But a wilderness is never a place we want to live. It's a place we want to journey through. They passed through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

You see, a wilderness is a place of danger; a place of temptation and testing. And it is easy to lose one's way in the wilderness. And when we lose our way in the wilderness of sin, we are unable to find our way out. By ourselves, we are not able to overcome the power of sin. We are too weak. All we can do is what the people did in John's day. They came out to the wilderness "*confessing their sins.*"

But God sent John into the wilderness to be the voice. And as the voice, John proclaimed, it says, "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" How comforting, when someone is lost in the wilderness, to hear a voice calling out to them.

Are you that someone? Have you been struggling with the power of sin in your own life? Has sin been victorious over you too often? If so, do you hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness? He is calling you back to your baptism; calling you to repentance.

It is the voice of John. He is not telling you to clean up your life, as if you can. He is telling you to admit defeat. To confess to God, "Lord, I cannot create in myself a clean heart, but You, O

Lord, can create a clean heart within me. Lord, I cannot find my out of the wilderness of my sin, but You, O Lord, can lead me out.”

This is why Jesus came, and why He comes to you today right here and now. You see, you cannot walk to the Promised Land in just your socks. You and I will never make it. But putting on Christ, you will.

We’re told that God’s people journeyed through the wilderness for forty years. And that the sandals on their feet, their shoes, never ever wore out! For forty years Christ led them through the wilderness. He became the shoes they wore, we can say, to bring them to the Promised Land.

No wonder John always pointed to Jesus. John can only tell us how filthy we are. But Jesus cleans up the filth in our hearts and lives. John can proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus is the one who truly forgives you. And He does forgive you, no matter how filthy your heart and life may be. Each and every one of you He forgives. John can call out to you in the wilderness, but only Jesus can lead you out.

Over Thanksgiving, our little grandson, along with his parents, were with us. And it was the sweetest thing to see his little shoes lined up beside all the big shoes. This picture reminds me that no matter how big or how little, how young or how old, Jesus has come for all sinners. He endured the wilderness of the cross for everyone. As He stretched out His arms there, no one was left out of that embrace.

You, too, are included. You, too, have a loving Savior. Your struggle with sin is a good thing when it leads you to the cross of your Lord; when it returns you to your baptism where there is, for you, Christ’s power over your sin.

*“How beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim the good news!”* cries the apostle. How beautiful are your feet! For in baptism you wear Christ like strong and sturdy shoes; sandals which will never wear out but will lead you through the wilderness to the Promised Land of heaven. Amen.