
GANZ - ADVENT MEDITATION, SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT 2024



St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness (1533-1578)¹, Engravings by Cort van Hoorn Cornelis (1533-1578)² and Girolamo Muziano (1532 – died Rome, 27 April 1592).³

In Matthew 10, the evangelist lets us remember with him that day, or was it over the course of a few weeks, when Jesus finally decided who from out of “the crowds” were to be His closest colleagues – the Twelve.

Matthew 10 (NJB): ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon who is known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who was also his betrayer.⁴

Have you ever taken the time to wonder whom *you* would want at your side if you now knew that God wanted you to make the people of your homeland available to undergo a profound *conversion*, after the fashion of Jonah sent to Nineveh of the Assyrians? Whom would you choose to help you do this? Who would be capable of this? Who would be interiorly free enough to bear so profound an assault on what most consider “normal”, or “good enough”?

¹ See: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/418442>.

² *Grove Art (Oxford Art Online)* at **Cort (Van Hoorn), Cornelis (1533; d. Rome before 22 April 1578)**. “North Netherlandish engraver and draughtsman, active in Flanders and Italy. ... In Rome, Cort produced important prints after Raphael, Giulio Romano, Correggio and Federico Barocci but worked most extensively with Federico and Taddeo Zuccaro, Giulio Clovio and **Girolamo Muziano**. The series of *Penitent Saints in Large Landscapes* (seven prints; 1573–5) after Muziano is especially impressive in the handling of landscape. ... More than any of his predecessors Cort made use of the capacity of the engraved line to broaden and taper again in the course of a single stroke and was thus able to produce plates that were boldly engraved (and suited to printing in large editions) but also subtly modelled. This style was admired and further developed in the later 16th century by Goltzius and his followers in the northern Netherlands and by Carracci in Italy and forms the basis for most reproductive engraving throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.”

³ *Grove Art (Oxford Art Online)* at **Muziano, Girolamo (1532-1592)**. “Italian painter and draughtsman. He trained as a landscape painter in Padua and Venice, but from 1549 he worked in Rome. ... Subsequently Muziano concentrated on religious subjects, further developing his interpretation of the spiritual values of the Counter-Reformation. Responding to the growing market for popular devotional images, he designed many engravings, notably nine scenes from the *Life of Christ* and two versions of the *Stigmatization of St Francis*, all issued by **Cornelis Cort in 1567–8**, and seven plates of *Penitent Saints* in large landscapes, issued by Cort in 1573–5 (London, BM; Hollstein, nos 77, 80–81, 83, 86–7, 128–9, 135). ... In the late 1570s and the 1580s the patronage of Gregory XIII ensured that Muziano was the foremost religious artist in Rome, and in 1577 he persuaded the Pope to establish the Accademia di S Luca.”

⁴ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 10:2–4.

What *conversion* did Jesus mean, and what did John the Baptist mean when he said, “Repent!” (Greek, *metanoia*)? One scholar puts it this way:

The experience of conversion is central to the biblical and spiritual traditions of both Judaism and Christianity. Although described in other metaphors, this phenomenon seems to be given centrality in other world religions as well. Within the Judeo-Christian writings, conversion means a two-phased turning: first, it is a turning away from alienation and sin, a phase ordinarily called repentance; second, it is a turning toward the living God, a phase sometimes called enlightenment. The Christian Scriptures refer to this process by two Greek words: *metanoia*, a turning from sin, and *epistrophē*, a turning toward God.⁵

What may surprise us Americans is that neither John the Baptist nor Jesus had the slightest interest in reforming institutions, political or religious. (At best, they intended this indirectly.) I don’t think we ponder this nearly enough.

And when we do not, we use what is lacking, even aggressively toxic, in institutions to excuse ourselves from owning our own deficiencies and doing the hard work of becoming free. We waste our life’s energies worrying about our institutions, complaining about them, wondering how or who we will “fix” them for us. I remember a wise remark spoken to me years ago: “Rick, I have learned over a lifetime of offering spiritual direction to people that most do not want to change [i.e., *metanoia*, conversion], they just want the pain to go away.” Eventually we lose heart as the unholy and unworthy begin to use our Us for their personal advantage, while the rest of us look for ways to hide from them. Fear has begun its rule. Or as Edgar Allan Poe put it so dramatically, “And from a proud tower in the town / death looks gigantically down.”⁶

John 3 (NJB):

¹⁹ And the judgement is this:
though the light has come into the world
people have preferred
darkness to the light
because their deeds were evil. ⁷

⁵ Michael Downey, in [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 231, the article “conversion” by Richard N. Fragomeni.

⁶ From his poem “The City in the Sea”, published in 1845.

⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 3:19.

The Old Testament prophets reminded us, including John the Baptist, and then Jesus and all of those who have loved and served Him with a sincere heart, have reminded us: the one thing necessary begins in the human heart; it *can* only begin there. Repentance has very little to do with our sins; it has very much to do with reclaiming our interior freedom: the rediscovered joy, and our responsibility, to love freely what is good and true and beautiful, and freely to reject the opposite. *We are free* to want this, choosing to let God have us, asking to undergo a transformation in the Spirit ... many times in our life. This is the primary significance of what John the Baptist preached:

² 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.'⁸

And it is what St. Paul was getting at, very much in the tradition of the Baptist:

1 Corinthians 2 (NJB): ¹⁴ The natural person has no room for the gifts of God's Spirit; to him they are folly; he cannot recognize them, because their value can be assessed only in the Spirit. ¹⁵ The spiritual person, on the other hand, can assess the value of everything, and his own value cannot be assessed by anybody else. ¹⁶ For: *who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his adviser?* But we are those who have the mind of Christ.⁹

John was inviting, nay commanding, that people reclaim their interior freedom – it is hard work! - and to allow God to reestablish within each of them the ground of his or her joy and human prospering, which will enable him or her to sustain that joy, even inside experiences of suffering forced on them by the unscrupulous.

Psalm 146 (NJB):

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in any child of Adam, who has no power to save.

⁴ When his spirit goes forth, he returns to the earth,
on that very day all his plans come to nothing.

⁵ How blessed is he who has Jacob's God to help him,
his hope is in Yahweh his God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea and all that is in them.

⁸ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 3:2.

⁹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Co 2:14–16.

He keeps faith forever,
7 gives justice to the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry;
Yahweh sets prisoners free. 10

In this second Week of Advent, I have wanted to bring our attention toward St. John the Baptist (he who is portrayed in the engraving above), the last Prophet of the Old Testament, the forerunner of “the long-expected Jesus / Born to set Thy people free / From our fears and sins release us / Let us find our rest in Thee.”¹¹ Jesus Himself said of John:

Matthew 11 (NJB): ¹¹ ‘In truth I tell you, of all the children born to women, there has never been anyone greater than John the Baptist;¹² ... ¹³ Because it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading; ¹⁴ and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return. ¹³

If one were to read all of Jesus’ instructions to the Twelve collected in Matthew 10, which Jesus articulated just after John had been arrested (e.g. Matthew 11:2), then one might notice how it is a beautiful description by Jesus of what He loved most about John the Baptist. *Jesus was training His Twelve to be like John.* John was the model!

Let us take a moment, in conclusion, to contemplate the engraving *John the Baptist in the Wilderness* from the 16th century.

First, a “colorless” representation – this engraving – offers us a chance not to get distracted by color, its magnificent deployment by the great painters. When color is lacking, we look more carefully at structure. Think about what we learn in Autumn when a deciduous tree no longer wears its gorgeous leaves. We are given access to the tree’s inside, if you will, the structure that makes the outside – its leaves – possible. John addressed the inside of the people who came to hear him by the River Jordan. It was their insides that he perceived, which he recognized needed work.

¹⁰ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 146:3–7.

¹¹ A hymn by Charles Wesley, “Come, Thou long expected Jesus” (1744).

¹² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 11:11.

¹³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 11:13–14.

Second, notice that Roman bridge back there. It symbolizes the role that John the Baptist serves – he is a bridge. He is, on the one hand, the last Prophet of the Old Testament, but, on the other hand, he burns with an all-consuming devotion to what is new, to what is about to break through, tearing open the very Heavens, through which sounds, finally, the fully credible Voice, clear and direct, which our ears were especially designed to hear (Matthew 3:16-17).

Drop down, ye heavens, from above,
and let the skies pour down righteousness.

Be not wroth very sore, O Lord,
neither remember iniquity forever:
thy holy cities are a wilderness,
Sion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation:
our holy and our beautiful house,
where our fathers praised thee.¹⁴

But that distant bridge also suggests the God-Man – the living bridge between Heaven and Earth, the One who will be the living exemplar of: “Thy will be done / on Earth / as it is in Heaven.” It was for His sake that John gave his whole life, and for whose sake he will have it taken from him by a petty King, a “tetrarch” of Galilee and Perea.

Third, notice that leopard¹⁵ who lies in peaceful slumber at John’s feet. Perhaps she lies there with one eye open, watchful, guarding that remarkable man. Consider how easily we can conclude that she is *tame*. But a tame Leopard is one whose essential nature has been dominated by human beings, forced to have its beautiful fierceness humiliated. I recall how Jack London describes a wolf:

“He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being, the perfect joy of each separate muscle, joint, and sinew in that it was everything that was not death, that it was aglow and rampant, expressing itself in movement, flying exultantly under the stars.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The ancient Latin hymn, “Rorate Caeli”, based on Isaiah 45:8.

¹⁵ *Wikipedia*: “The leopard is one of the five extant cat species in the genus *Panthera*. It has a pale yellowish to dark golden fur with dark spots grouped in rosettes. Its body is slender and muscular reaching a length of 92–183 cm with a 66–102 cm long tail and a shoulder height of 60–70 cm. It can hit a speed of 36 mph.”

¹⁶ Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*. In this novel, as in *White Fang*, London adopts the perspective of the wolves, wanting us to see and feel what they do.

That leopard was created just as we were, created on the same day of Creation that we were, on that very busy sixth day (Genesis 1:24-31). There is something that has happened to John on the inside that no longer causes the “wild animals” to fear him. They are content to share the world with him.

Isaiah 11 (NJB):

⁵ Uprightness will be the belt around his waist,
and constancy the belt about his hips.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the panther lie down with the kid,
calf, lion and fat-stock beast together,¹⁷

...

⁹ No hurt, no harm will be done
on all my holy mountain,
for the country will be full of knowledge of Yahweh
as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁸

Happy second Week of Advent everyone.

¹⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Is 11:5-6.

¹⁸ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Is 11:9.