

Matthew 3: 1-12  
November 28, 2010  
United Memorial

I am an old woman now... but I was there that day...

That day when John the Baptist started preaching his message of repentance...

My husband didn't know I had crept away from our cooking tent... but you see I had known John when we were children and I wanted to see him again.

John and I were part of a group of children who were inseparable for a quite a few years, until he had to learn the lessons of being a man and I learned the tasks of being a woman... and so it had been many long years since I had seen John.

In fact, when I heard of this man, I couldn't believe it was the same person I had known, so part of what brought me to the banks of the Jordan was curiosity.

Just what was John like now?

Did he remember the times we spent together?

Was it true what I was hearing about him? That he wore strange clothing and ate weird food?

What was this message of repentance I was hearing about?

You see, he was the son of a priest and you know how people expect great things from sons of priests.

And I heard that he had studied scripture seriously and faithfully and was set to follow in his father's footsteps and take his rightful place in the temple.

And then I heard nothing more of him, except that his father was embarrassed and

Well, some of the things I had heard about him were true....

He did look a little crazed... he had fire in his eyes... they looked right at you and you couldn't look away...

He was calling upon people to repent... to change their ways... because the kingdom of heaven was at hand...

You could see his religious upbringing when he quoted the prophet Isaiah and said, "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out, "In the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

My friend John believed that he was a messenger from God!

No wonder people thought he was crazy!

But John was more than crazy...

Yes, he was disruptive and shocking... he was forceful and fearless...

And he must have been resourceful... to survive on in the desert...

But John was also charismatic... if he wasn't, people wouldn't have listened to him for more than five minutes... but the crowds kept on getting larger...

And they wanted to be baptized by him... even the religious leaders... the Sadducees and Pharisees came to hear him and be baptized with water.

I never thought I would see the day that they would come and seek repentance and I never thought I would see the day that they were called a brood of vipers!

I thought John would be struck down right where he stood when he called them

These words frightened me... for myself and for John...

We had been waiting for a Messiah for centuries... but John seemed to be saying that those who did not bear good fruit... those would be cast into the fire...

Scary stuff for me... it made me ask if I was bearing good fruit in my life.

And what about John?

Why would he say such things?

People had been cast out of the community for less than what he was saying....

But I guess John felt compelled by something greater than you or I...

His sense of purpose must have been incredible..

To warn us to change our ways... preaching salvation to those who repented... warning us of what was to come if we did not change...

But most important of all, to try and prepare us for someone greater than him...

He was talking about the Messiah... God's anointed one... we all expected the Messiah to be a great warrior... the one who would set us free from our Roman oppressors....

I am an old woman now... and I lived to see Jesus...

But... you know and I know that the Messiah was not a warrior...

Jesus was born just like you and me... a helpless baby...

Yes, when he grew up he first astounded the religious leaders with his knowledge...

And yes, like John, he told us that we all needed to repent and change our ways...

But he also preached to us about God's love and welcome for each one of us...

Women and children, tax collectors and Gentiles... each one of us was welcome in the realm of God.

Each one of, who for whatever reason, had been excluded from God's realm...

And he taught us that the realm of God was not just about what happened to us after we died... but it was about how we lived with each other here on earth...

And that we each have a hand in creating it.

You call him the Prince of Peace don't you?

He was not always a peaceful man to have around... but he presented a vision of God's Shalom to us, just like Isaiah gave us in our scriptures...

A vision where there was nobody left out...

A vision of a place for each one of us...

But he didn't just leave us with the vision... he left us with the responsibility to work for the vision...

That's harder than waiting for a saviour to come and make everything right...

We wanted a warrior to come and overturn our oppressors... but Jesus taught us that warriors can't create peace and shalom... warriors only create war... and more violence...

Instead Jesus taught us these things...

So, this Christmas season, as you prepare once again to welcome the Prince of Peace into your homes and hearts...

Take comfort and strength for the work of peace... a peace that is not the absence of war in parts of the world... but an absence of war throughout the world...

A peace that is not just food for some... but for everyone...

A peace that sees each naked person clothed... each hungry mouth fed... each oppressed one freed....

A peace that starts with how we interact with each other in small ways and large ones...

A peace that begins in your own hearts and spreads to the world...

Farewell my friends, blessings on you as you prepare to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.