

Each new generation chooses its own clothing, hairstyles and music. Kids entertain themselves by trying new styles and watching their parents react. Even though the differences between generations become very apparent to those who live with them every day, some traditions always stay in place. We pick up a lot from our parents even when we don't intend to. Traditions stabilize us as the world changes around us.

John the Baptist appeared on the scene with a strange blend of the traditional and the new. His parents couldn't have liked the way he dressed – camel's hair, leather belt – or the way he ate – locusts, wild honey. He lived in the desert. Many artists have depicted John the Baptist with such long, unkempt and skanky hair that you can practically smell him on the painted canvas. But John was a traditional kind of guy. He knew his bible. By going into the desert, urging people to repent, he fulfilled a prophecy of Isaiah. His clothes were the same style worn by Elijah the prophet. His message quoted Malachi, another prophet. John was faithful to the tradition of his ancestors. This surely appealed to the older generation, but John must have looked a bit repulsive to them. The gospels are filled with stories of people who ate and drank with Jesus, but nobody sat down to an evening meal of grilled bugs with John the Baptist.

He was a traditional prophet, but his message was something altogether new. He says, "One mightier than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John convinced people that the coming of Jesus would be so different from anything anyone had experienced, that they should get ready for it by confessing their sins and being baptized. They did this in huge numbers, but it was nothing compared to the influence Jesus himself would have on their lives when he came.

Saint Mark reports all this at the very beginning of his gospel. He starts off with a solemn announcement: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Scholars believe that Mark was the first person to write a gospel, and by calling his work a gospel he actually coined the term. He wrote a rule of life for the followers of Jesus: how he lived and how we should live. A gospel is not really a biography; Mark does not tell about the birth of Jesus. He starts right in with John the Baptist, who introduces the adult Jesus. Mark wants us to be ready now to meet Christ, and he does it through the message of John: Prepare the way of the Lord. Be traditional, and be open to a new generation.

We celebrate this season with a number of family traditions. But we also open our hearts to something new. How do we need Christ now? How can we prepare our hearts for his coming this year? For what do we need forgiveness today? What can we learn from the generations behind us and after us? What clothing, hairstyles and music will help us celebrate the meaning of this season? With careful thought and a humble spirit, we can make this advent a time of tradition, but also a time for new personal growth. Prepare the way of the Lord.