

According to the bible, one day King Ahaziah crashed through the lattice of his upper chamber and fell injured onto the first floor below. We don't know what he was doing that caused this un-kingly thing to happen, but there it is. It hurt so much that he sent messengers to ask Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether or not he would recover from his injury. The God of Israel was upset that Ahaziah was going to seek help from a false god instead. So God dispatched an angel to Elijah the prophet and told him to intercept the messengers. Elijah meets them on their way to Baal-zebub. He tells them the king is wrong to ask a false god about his injury. Elijah says, "I'll tell you how bad the injury is. The king will never again leave his bed. He will die." The messengers returned to the king, who asked, "What are you doing here?" They said, "There came a man to meet us, who said, 'Go back to the king who sent you, and say to him: Thus says the Lord: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but shall surely die.'" The king said, "What sort of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?" They answered him, "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "Oh. Elijah."

That is why John the Baptist shows up in the gospels wearing leather and hair. If you want to be really fashionable this Advent, you could do the same. John's dress signaled to people that he was like Elijah. This raised eyebrows because at the end of Elijah's life, a sweet chariot swung low to carry him home. The bible does not explicitly say that Elijah died -- just that a chariot of fire swept down from heaven and took him away. In fact, another prophet, Malachi, predicted that Elijah would return on the day when God had something important to say. When John appeared looking the way he looked and preaching the way he preached, many people thought Elijah had come back and the end was near.

John's appearance made people listen to his message: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus himself preached the same line: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Each December our country makes many preparations for Christmas, and Christians take extra care to make spiritual preparations as well. We recall John's message, not just because of how he dressed, but because his words give a timeless reminder that Christ is present here, and we should behave like it.

How to celebrate Advent? Some people devote more time to prayer or spiritual reading. Some will come for the sacrament of reconciliation to confess their sins and celebrate Christmas with a new heart and soul. Others will be more charitable to their neighbor, making gifts of time, talent and treasure to those they love and to those in need.

This Advent let us heed John the Baptist and prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ through repentance and charity.