

John was calling people to repent, and what he said touched them so much and so deeply that not only did they regret their past sinfulness...why they were even baptized by him....symbolic of their identification with his movement.

John, the Baptizer, is not a carnival "sideshow", but is solidly within the tradition of the prophets, and his story is essential to the story of Jesus that follows. In fact, Mark's Gospel begins with the words,

"The beginning of the Good News of Jesus
Christ....the Son of God."

And in a sense, yes...that "Good News" begins not with Jesus, but with John. I think we can say and be comfortable with this judgement that he really was "the one who got the whole thing started."

HOME AND PARENTS

To understand that John was not a "wide-eyed" desert crazy, we need to go back and look at his home and his parents. And as we read the story of his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, we become aware of how God's hand was on John...even before he was born.

Remember how Zechariah and Elizabeth were an elderly couple who had been unable to have children. Zechariah was a priest who regularly took his turn serving in the great temple up there in Jerusalem. On one fateful day the lot fell on Zechariah to enter the sanctuary of God...the "holy of Holies"...to offer a sacrifice on behalf of all the people. This generally was a privilege which would fall on a regular priest but once in his lifetime. While in this sacred place something extraordinary happened. Apparently, not only did Zechariah pray for the people, but he also prayed that his wife would have a child. Then the angel Gabriel appears to him and announces that his prayers have been heard....that Elizabeth shall bear a son and Zechariah shall name him....JOHN!

There's something here that touches me....it's a wonderfully "human" story. Here's Zechariah, in the big moment of his life, there in the great Temple, and praying for all of Israel, but slipping in a tiny prayer for a child. I like it. And it is this latter prayer which is heard. It reminds me that God listens not for the silvery tongues, but for the whisper of sincerity in our prayers. I've heard people occasionally say, "But, really.....I don't know how to pray" to which I am always tempted to say, "Good...then GO AHEAD and PRAY!"

God hears far too many prayers from the clergy that sound more like political agendas or church announcements of various activities than prayer. God doesn't need clergy complaining about the price of gas, or reminders to pick up those cake pans left behind...God needs to hear some honest prayer.

Zechariah is startled, I'm sure, by Gabriel's announcement. In fact, he outright questions it....so he asks with the sensitive tact of a long-married senior citizen,

"How will I know that this is so? For I am an
old man and my wife is getting on in years..."

Well...Gabriel is not too pleased with Zechariah's doubt, so he causes him to be unable to speak for the duration of his wife's pregnancy, thereby making Zechariah the unofficial "patron saint" of pregnant women.