

The Prophet Elijah was a hairy man who wore a leather belt. John the Baptist dressed in camel hair and a leather belt. Elijah harassed kings who did not remain faithful to God. John confronted Herod for his adulterous behavior that demonstrated his break with the God of Israel. The locusts in his diet recall the divine judgment that God brought upon Egypt in order to soften their hearts toward his people. The wild honey recalls the experience of the Prophet Ezekiel who was told to eat a scroll with “lamentation, mourning and woe” written on it by the Lord. The bitter taste of the scroll turned to honey in his mouth.

This melding of this prophetic symbolism was not lost on the Jews as they came out to listen to the man who leapt in his mother’s womb when Mary visited Elizabeth and he first came into the presence of Jesus, the Messiah.

John’s call to repentance, to letting go of sin, letting go of distraction, letting go of worldly concerns that interfere with our relationship with God is just as valid today as it was about 1,983 years ago on the banks of the Jordan River. We are human therefore our mental and spiritual capacity is limited. As we continue on our journey toward Christmas we need to clean out the junk and make some space in our hearts and in our lives for God.

Take a moment and think about what you really want for Christmas. Is it material? Most of us seem to focus on that aspect, the commercialism of the season is filled with conspicuous spending and at least 6 months of debt. Or are we focused on what is truly important? Peace in our hearts brought on by communion with God. Peace in our families, brought on by the peace in our hearts. Some time together just to enjoy each other’s company vice seeing just how badly we can misbehave without finding those flashing blue lights parked outside our front door.

A Christmas focused on the birth of Jesus Christ. Sounds great doesn’t it? So how do we get there? How do we escape the behaviors that seem to be demanded by our society? It starts with our new year’s resolution, not the secular New Year, but the Church’s new year that started last week. We start by making a resolution to clear some space for Jesus in our lives; time for prayer, time for adoration, and time for reconciliation. Then we need to live our Catholic identity out there, in the world.

The world out there is fickle. I could all go out tomorrow and become a pastafarinan. I could decide to worship the trinity of rigatoni, manicotti and spaghetti. Instead of saying amen, I could say ramen and instead of vestments, I could wear a colander on my head and a robe made of cloth to look like fettuccini decorated with tortellini while I preach the benefits of full communion with macaroni and no one would object. Set up a web site and a twitter account and I would have a thousand followers in the first month. I could apply for my 501c tax-exempt status and with that number of followers it would be a too easy. Then I would be off and running on my way to building a mega-church that looks like an old style Italian kitchen complete with a wood-burning oven.

But if anyone of us go out in public and express or defend our Catholic faith, hatred and opposition appear. We shouldn't say Merry Christmas because someone could be offended. If you want to be looked at like you are strange, say grace before your meal in a restaurant and don't forget to make the Sign of the Cross. By law do the same freedoms and protections that apply to pastafarinans apply to Catholics? The answer of course is yes. Are the same social standards that support that freedom in practice applied equally to pastafarinans and Catholics? The answer unfortunately is no.

The world out there is a place that doesn't like us, and doesn't want to accept us. It is a place that quite frankly is afraid of us and who we represent because our beliefs are diametrically opposed to how the world thinks and what it wants to believe. On the other hand, it is a place that needs us and wants what we have, the peace in our hearts that can only come from Jesus Christ. We just need to have the courage to live that peace here within the walls of the Church where it is easy, in our homes where it is a bit harder, and out in the world where it is a significant challenge in order to bring the peace of Christ out into the world that needs it so much.

John the Baptist lived his faith from the inside out. He had the divine gift of knowing Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah from before his birth. We have to grow into our faith just like the Apostles, from the outside in. We listen, we study, we learn, we put aspects of what we have learned into practice, integrating it into our daily lives and letting it seep into our souls as we continue to listen, study and learn. Continually growing a closer, deeper relationship with God. As our relationship with Jesus matures, what we

have practiced from the outside starts to come back out from the inside and subtle, but wonderful things start to happen in our lives.

And when we stop practicing, when we decide that if there isn't any faith formation classes then I don't have to go to Church, or the kids are all grown up so I don't need this anymore, when we figure that we can do it on our own, what happens then? Lets' look at it this way. If you like to play golf and don't pick up a club for 6 months, what does your game look like? If you play the piano and don't practice, how does your favorite piece of music sound when you decide to play it for a friend? The same goes for any sport or discipline that requires a modicum of skill. The longer you go without practice, the worse your skill set becomes until you literally have to start almost from scratch and re-learn the skill.

Separating ourselves from the love of God, ignoring the divine spark, the whisper of the Holy Spirit in our souls is much more harmful than adding strokes to our handicap in golf or making hash of a musical tune. The acceptance or rejection of the invitation to have a relationship with God determines where we will spend eternity.

While we all need to be grateful that we don't have to emulate John the Baptist's wardrobe or diet, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord; to make some space and prepare our hearts and our homes for the coming of our Lord and Savior. Put up the tree, and enjoy the decorations. Say Merry Christmas to everyone you meet. More importantly, make sure the Christmas Crèche is in a prominent location where the family can gather for prayer and make straight the way to our hearts for the birth of Jesus.