

**Sermon "God without Parking"**  
**December 7, 2025**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**  
**Rev. John Balicki**  
**St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine**

So in the 21<sup>st</sup> century religious landscape of the United States, just where is the flock, at least what remains of a flock, flocking to? They're called mega-churches and here's what they seem to be seeking:

- **Sprawling Campuses:** Often resembling shopping centers ( I mean what's more American, more popular, more comfortable than a shopping mall – well I mean they used to be) with expansive grounds, big parking garages (speaking of parking, the website of a Portland- area megachurch suggests if you are brand new to put your hazard lights on as you pull into the parking lot and their incredible roadie team will lead you to a reserved parking spot). We are now taking applications if you would like to become part of the St. Luke's "roadie team".
- **State-of-the-Art Auditoriums:** Feature huge stages, Jumbotron screens, professional lighting, and high-quality sound systems for a powerful sensory experience. High-energy music, rock bands, and dramatic productions create an emotional, entertaining atmosphere.
- **Hospitality Zones:** Include coffee shops, bookstores, food courts
- **Recreation & Education:** Offer children's theaters, computer labs, fitness centers, and community programs.

The Venues (let's not use antiquated churchy terms like sanctuary, nave or apse(still trying to figure out some of those myself) seat 1,600 for a Maine-sized megachurch, 25,000 or even 43,000 in a Houston-sized church.

Dress – casual, at least for clergy - no off putting robes or even shirts or ties; Pastor Rick Warren at the Saddleback church in California prefers Hawaiian shirts and bermuda shorts.

Some of that may sound good, some not – that's coffee hour conversation – but I'm guessing it is far beyond the bounds of most of our experiences. But let's contrast that with where people were heading in 27 CE.

The people of Judea and Jerusalem were flocking to a place that was very different from their average religious experience in synagogue or Jerusalem temple. We hear today that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan River, were going out to this powerful, yet rather odd, man named John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness - no campus, no parking, no roadies, no lattes or cappuccinos.

It's estimated that the distance from Jerusalem to where John baptized was 20-25 miles, a solid full day's walk in anybody's day. And no roadies when they got there, but they didn't get a latte either. So why did they do it?

That's a hard one to answer. Each person's spiritual journey has its own history and own reasons. But it may not be that different from what those flocking to megachurches are also looking for - a different spiritual experience - believing that the existing institutions were not giving them what they wanted. For Jews of the day, it was significant that John was a long ways from the Jerusalem temple and the religious establishment. They didn't have to pay the temple tax or offer the proscribed sacrifices. But they still walked 20 to 25 miles. What did they find when they got there?

Not a guy in a Hawaiian shirt or fancy vestments. They found a man wearing animal skins - "hair of camels," the Greek says vividly - held together with a strip of leather for a belt. He eats locusts and wild honey. He looks like the prophet Elijah who in the Second Book of Kings is described the same way - as a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist.

The point is clear: John is like Elijah, who rebukes the king for forgetting God. John is like Elijah, who, in Jewish expectation at the time of Jesus, would come again when the reign of God was at hand. When Matthew describes John the Baptist as Elijah, he is saying two things:

- This is a time like that time: People are forgetting God. There is need for repentance.
- This is the time Israel has been waiting for: The reign of God is at hand.

And this is exactly what John says, when he first comes on the scene: "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand". But what is he really saying?

When John the Baptist comes in from the wilderness toward the Jordan, he is a counter-cultural force. Whatever his struggle and his story, it's clear that he is no longer trying to please his culture, find success, make his family proud. He's given up all of that. What he is after is what the Greek text in Matthew calls *metanoia*, and what the English so often feebly translates as "repentance." *Metanoiete*, John the Baptist says, a word that

has two Greek roots. *Meta* means to “go beyond,” and *noia* is a form of the Greek word *nous*, which is often translated “mind.” So *metanoiete* could perhaps be translated as “go beyond your mind,” “transcend yourself.” When St. Jerome was translating the Greek text into the first Latin edition of the Scriptures, he didn’t think it was his job to translate the Greek as closely as possible. Instead, he sought to improve upon the Greek with his superior Latin understanding, so when he encountered *metanoiete*, he translated it *poenitentiam agite*. “Do penance,” or as it became in English, “repent.” And so it has been ever since.

Think of the richness that was lost when John’s word went from *metanoiete* to *poenitentiam* to *repent*. The Greek word suggests a kind of transformation that the Latin does not even imagine. It means inviting uncertainty and the unknown into your life and letting it change you. John the Baptist wasn’t asking people to convert to a different religion. He was asking, even demanding, that they make a radical change in their way of seeing and acting in the world, that they “bear fruit worthy” of this *metanoia*. It is in association with wild places that *metanoia* becomes possible. John the Baptist sounds rather harsh in this passage, no doubt about it. But it’s a harshness born out of two things: the urgency of transformation and the brutal honesty of the wilderness.

So what’s the solution? Probably not lattes, roadies, and Hawaiian shirts. But even here at St. Luke’s, are we too tame for what the Baptist was getting at? Should we have our worship on the top of Mt. Blue? Do the 1.6 mile hike in the snow and cold as a way of showing our transformation? Well not literally – that would hurt church attendance more than no latte or roadies. But figuratively, Yes. As we hit the second week of Advent, we are forced to ask ourselves, some almost 2,000 years later, is the kingdom of God still coming near? Is it within reach? And do I give a hoot if it is? Would I walk 20 to 25 miles to get in touch with it? John was trying to prepare the people of his day to be receptive to another prophet, Jesus, one also with a very different message, who called his followers “friends” and told them also to bear fruit.

To invite uncertainty and the unknown takes courage, and involves a journey into a wilderness whether real or imagined. Eventually everyone trucks back home whether from the Jordan River, from the parking garage, from St. Luke’s. Some will have experienced *metanoiete*, others may say “that’s nice” and look for the next spiritual high. Hopefully we’ve helped you get in touch with a desire, an ache, to walk 25 miles to satisfy a spiritual yearning, given you food for the journey and companions along the way. Only you can answer that question but I hope and pray we continue on that road.

