

*Go tell John what you see and hear . . .*

If today's Gospel reading were staged as in a theater, John the Baptist would be coming out from behind the curtain looking gaunt and wild – and clothed just as wildly in a garb of camel's hair and a leather belt - shouting at the religious leaders in the audience (the Sadducees and Pharisees) – calling them toxic and asking: *Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?* In other words he would be angry.

And just for the record, while Matthew's version of this moment zeroes in on the clergy of the times, *Luke's* version of the same rant includes all the *laity* in John's audience as well! John is emotionally concerned about the routine maintenance of religious practices instead of their practitioners' serious understanding of them.

Now perhaps to soften the violent tone of John's language some interpreters suggest he was using anger as a rhetorical device to wake people up – that it was after all a staged performance. I remember as a teenager attending with my father one of those parish week-long missions or revivals – a long time ago. The church was full to capacity of male parishioners. It was conducted by two visiting priests. On the opening night the frowning, heavy set one strode out of the sacristy, mounted the pulpit and delivered a blast of accusation and imminent doom that left us all squirming with anxiety.

When he had finished and stomped into the sacristy, the second priest came out – smiling – climbed into the pulpit and began: *My dear friends, I hope you will forgive my colleague for his outburst. He gets like that now and again; bad temper, always apologetic once he's done. So show him some understanding even as God always shows mercy to souls in need.* Now *that* was staged. Shake 'em up but let 'em down easy.

But our Gospels don't play games. John the Baptist was indeed angry. Generation after generation his people had slackened off, not from their allegiance *to* but from their understanding *of* their unique tradition, its stories, its wisdom, its poetic prophets and psalms. Long time rivalries, “us-versus-them” based on mutual disdain, a leaning toward the idols of good luck (investments), everyday preoccupations, the sameness of behaviors from one generation to the next. No time to think, to revive the basic questions: why am I here, what is my relation to the whole of nature, where are we headed in the deeper sense of things. What is my heritage talking about?

John had had it up to here! with no one *even* asking questions! Reminds me of Howard Beale in the film *Network* who as news anchor one day “loses it” and shouts out: *I'm as mad as - - and I'm not going to take it any more.* And with that, apartment windows all over the city open with everybody delivering that same shout, probably over different issues. The point is that, judging by the journalism of today, an underlying anger may erupt because of our superficial sense of what and why we are. We can't repress our longing for some depth of meaning without there happening some kind of spontaneous combustion. John later in Matthew 11: 1-6 wonders whether Jesus shared his anger over the laxity of his people - to which Jesus replied *Blessed be those who are not scandalized by the grace whereby I would heal the human race.*