We read a passage from one of the gospels at every celebration of the eucharist. On Friday, having noticed something I’d not paid attention to before, I went through all of the Sundays in this year of our three-year lectionary, and this Sunday is unique—or at least very nearly so.

It is the only gospel reading in which Jesus does not appear. Of course in the birth narratives he is mostly off to the side or in a cradle, but he’s still there. The only real exception I found in my hurried survey is the prologue to John’s gospel, which we sometimes read at Christmas. (“In the beginning was the Word,” and so on.) Interesting to note, by the way that John is named, but Jesus is not.

But this is it, the only time in terms of Jesus’ adult life and ministry—as far as I found—that he does not appear. Instead, John tells his audience “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.”

Preparation. This whole season of Advent is one of preparation and expectation. John doesn’t even mention Jesus’ name. He’s like one of those billboards that catches your eye with white letters on a black background stating, “It’s coming!” Or, to a degree, like the old Burma Shave signs that about 50 of us in the world can remember: a catchy jingle causing us to anticipate the punch line on the last red plaque. An example: “It’s best for . . . one who hits . . . the bottle . . . to let another . . . use the throttle.”

Back to John. Here’s what my late mentor (though he never knew he was my mentor) Frederick Buechner had to say about him: “JOHN THE BAPTIST didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.”

He goes on to say that after recognizing Jesus immediately and baptizing him only when Jesus insisted, he might have begun to have second thoughts, maybe feeling that Jesus was too soft on crime—well, sin. This is Buechner’s brilliant description of the differences between the two: “Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can’t bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still was’t too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the WCTU, the Stewardship Committee, and the World Council of Churches rolled into one. Where John baptized, Jesus healed.”

Then, after sending some of his followers to ask Jesus if he were the Messiah or not, Jesus told them to report that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” and let him decide. Though we don’t know John’s response to that, it’s more than reasonable to think that his first impression had been confirmed by that report.

For Jesus’ part, he had this to say: “Among those born or women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (MT 11.11).

What are we to make of this? It seems that Biblical commentators are of different opinions, but I’m convinced by those who say that John didn’t know he was proclaiming Jesus, specifically. He was proclaiming a Messiah who was to come, but he didn’t know who that would be. Not, at least, until Jesus appeared on the scene, and then it hit John: this man, this cousin of mine, is the Messiah. That’s why he doesn’t name him in this passage. He didn’t know yet. So in today’s gospel setting the billboard was for himself as well as his followers.

Then there’s the matter of his expecting a different kind of Messiah—the whole ax, winnowing fork, chaff, and unquenchable fire thing.

I love that John is the one who declares that Jesus is the lamb of God upon first seeing him, that he recognizes Jesus as the promised Son of God at Jesus’ baptism, and that he is motivated to send his men to confirm that.

That’s a lot about John—the wild-eyed, zealous preacher of right behavior and certain damnation for those who don’t listen. And the baptizer of countless repentant sinners. He appears in all four gospels, while Jesus’ birth is recorded in only two. What an unlikely advance man he is, in light of Jesus’ more compassionate teachings and actions. But Jesus as I’ve quoted from Matthew, valued John as the greatest of men born of woman.

All this might be a sign that proclaiming the good news of Jesus is not confined to one style or approach. Different people, different times, different expressions. And it’s not only a question of different people out there, I’ve begun to think.

I’ll pause here to say that I know some of those ways of proclaiming Jesus leave me cold. So cold that if they were the ony way—a bit like John the Baptist’s way—I probably would pass. If that had been the only wat the message of Jesus were presented to me I probably would have eventually opted for Buddhism, or something I made up on my own. But I was fortunate enough—better, there was grace enough—that I heard preaching that emphasized the grace, love, and compassion of God, and I was reeled in, hook line, and sinker.

Oh, I was saying that these styles are not just proclaimed by different people. I think they’re present in all of us. Okay, I won’t presume to say that about you. But they’re certainly there inside of me: John the Baptist urging me to rail against all manner of folks I see as manipulative and abusive and exploitive of others. Those whom I judge to be wrong—or simply bad. Of course some of that judgement is aimed at myself, and that’s what I’m trying to say here: we need to look at how we recreate those Biblical characters within our psyches and spirits. To finish that picture, also inside me is Jesus himself, saying “Come to me, all you who are burdened and weighed down,” and “Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself.”

John provides a sense of urgency. More important to him than the identity of the messiah is this: “Do it now. Stop your greedy, self-serving, fearful behavior that exploits others and causes harm in the world. Bear good fruit. Do the next right thing. Open your hearts and souls.”

Those other prophets, especially characters in the parables—the Good Samaritan, the father of the Prodigal Son—and those people who trusted in God’s healing power manifested in Jesus, call to us in a different way, telling us that our lives and the life of the world can be transformed by our following the One who has come to save us all.

So John, all by himself in today’s reading, calls us to repent. Etymologically it’s the same word as regret but intensified to mean a profound regret that moves us to action. I’ll end with words, again, from Frederick Buechner: “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I'm sorry,’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’” + + +