

## What John didn't foresee

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP  
NC News Service

Deep in the desert wilderness east of Jerusalem runs the Jordan River. It is less than 20 miles from the city.

Yet it is in another world, nearly 4,000 feet below Jerusalem in the lowest spot on earth. The rugged slope in between is a badlands of eroded peaks and canyon walls.

It was in this hostile land, far from the comforts of the capital, that John the Baptist began his preaching. This is where Jesus began his public ministry after his baptism by John.

John obviously caught the imagination of his time. For "all Jerusalem" made the difficult trek down to the Jordan to see him.

John was a formidable figure, calling people to reform their lives. His graphic preaching of the doom to come either pushed or scared many people to repent.

Yet on one important point, the kind of Messiah to expect, John must have been surprised.

John was steeped in the language and traditions of the Old Testament. He looked for God to show himself through Jesus in ways that would fit the pattern of what he expected.

But he looked and waited in vain. Where was the vengeance and the sword? Where was the cleansing fire?

Even from prison where King Herod had locked him up, John sent followers to ask Jesus, "Are you 'he who is to come' or are we to look for another?"

Jesus was not quite what John expected the Messiah to be. Jesus spoke so much of mercy, forgiveness and healing. To the ordinary people, most of whom were poor, his voice was one of comfort.

A reading of Scripture and the history of the church lets us know that the unexpected — the surprise — is often God's way. We approach God in our own ways and those ways reflect our prejudices, our personal histories, and our limitations. Left to our own devices we would end up creating a God in our image.

But we are not left to our own devices. God comes to us and comes in God's way, not ours. This changes us.

When I was ordained a priest 20 years ago, I anticipated that my ministry would be the orderly and predictable life of a seminary professor. Yet somehow I was drawn into the lives of a group of socially and religiously marginal people, who attended Mass at our seminary chapel.

These people were poor, some of them emotionally distressed and their children often in trouble. I spent as much time in the hospital emergency room, the juvenile hall and the courtroom as I did in the classroom.

Yet it was in these unanticipated situations that I felt I began to understand my priesthood. Seeing how much my presence meant to people going through difficult times taught me how important concrete human ties are in ministry.

Ever since then, I have found the action of God more in the voices and needs of the deprived people who have sought my help than in the ministries I have chosen for myself.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not about to abandon the use of my mind or my ability to make choices, while simply waiting for God to come knocking in some unanticipated way.

But my expectations of God are my expectations. They may not be God's.

That was John the Baptist's surprising discovery. It must have been a surprise to many of the first Christians, too, who once had thought the Messiah would be different when he came.

It certainly was a surprise to me in my ministry — but one I learned to welcome.

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## At water's edge

### John the Baptist — last of the fiery desert

By Father John Castelot  
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John the Baptizer is one of the few characters in the Gospels about whom we have any information from secular history. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing toward the end of the first century, corroborates what the Gospel says about him up to a certain point.

Josephus wrote: "Herod put to death this good man who was exhorting the Jews to live upright lives, in dealing justly with one another and submitting devoutly to God, and to join in baptism."

Josephus also said: "When still others joined the crowds around (John), because they were quite enthusiastic in listening to his words, Herod became frightened that such persuasiveness with the people might lead to some upris-

ing; for it seemed that they might go to any length on his advice."

Here Josephus parts company with the gospel story. Herod's fear of John's potential political power was behind his arrest and execution, Josephus indicates. The Gospel, of course, says that Herod had John beheaded at the insistence of his wife, Herodias. She was furious at John's condemnation of her marriage.

However, the two motives could both apply. Herod may well have feared John's power with the people; Herodias may well have resented his embarrassing accusations.

At any rate, it seems clear that John was an immensely popular preacher with a large, loyal following. Their loyalty did not die with his execution. The Gospels indicate, in Luke 11:1 for instance, that during John's

lifetime his followers formed a distinctive group of disciples with a distinctive prayer life.

We get a picture of a tremendously influential preacher in the mold of the Old Testament prophets.

There is a famous story in the Old Testament about Elijah being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. The story caught the popular imagination and in the course of time the belief arose that Elijah would one day return. His return would herald the establishment of God's reign.

Apparently John saw himself as preparing the way for the return of Elijah and the establishment of God's reign. The kinds of things he said to the crowds are typical of the uncompromising preaching of the fiery desert prophets of old.

Announcing God's coming kingdom would have appealed