

John the Baptist; Taylor Swift Advent: Second Week

I am not a Swiftie, but I have close family who are Swifties, I have heard most all her songs, and I even saw about half of the Era's Tour movie. So, I am not an expert, but I have witnessed enough to say that she is not only a generational talent but a voice for tens of millions of people. Did you know that at her concerts - which stretch for three and a half hours – the audience sings along with her? They know all the words to all her songs. Her lyrics are theirs. She has traveled across the United States and to most parts of the world to sing, and in every city tens of thousands are drawn to her concerts, filling the stadiums and energizing the locals. This phenomenon does not just happen because of sophisticated marketing. It happens because what she sings resonates with the listeners. She communicates something meaningful to each person and they go out to hear her.

It does not say in the Scriptures if John the Baptist could sing. Probably not. But crowds of people were drawn to him. We are talking about a happening on a much smaller scale than the Eras Tour, of course, but he “went about the entire region of Jordan” (Luke 3:3) and large numbers of people went out to hear him. He was a phenomenon, a religious luminary who attracted devoted followers who would keep him at the center of their identity even past the life of Jesus. “All the Judean countryside and the people of Jerusalem went out to him in great numbers.” (Mark 1:5)

But John was an odd personage at that. He lived in the desert, the wilderness. The Gospels say he was “clothed in a garment of camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food.” (Matthew 3:4) His message was direct, challenging, but it found its mark in people’s hearts and souls. Many turned their lives around after hearing him speak. If you had asked them why they were responding to this strange man, they may not have been able to explain how the words of another person revealed something true about themselves and their experience.

How does it happen that a singer or a prophet gains such significance that people turn over a piece of their inner selves to what that figure is about? How is it that a lyric or a spoken word can uncover disappointments, joys, regrets and second chances, emotions, realizations, affirmation and inspiration? It is very mysterious, but it happens. There are countless other musicians and religious figures besides Taylor Swift and John the Baptist, but whoever it is that has brought us out of ourselves or revealed something within ourselves, we all know the feeling of being drawn beyond the superficial to the more sublime dimension of human experience.

We are in a season rich with inspirations. Whether we are feeling the solace of traditions as we approach Christmas or a heightened awareness that we are capable of goodness and generosity, we are surrounded by customs, gatherings, decorations, music, and religious symbols that entice us to hope and to believe that redemption is still possible. In these weeks before Christmas there is a Taylor Swift or a John the Baptist out there for us, that is, a singular voice, a penetrating message, a surprising experience that will cut through the ordinary and reveal something that will lift and broaden our spirits. It is a matter of being on the watch, of being open to how God is approaching us.