"The Voice of One Crying Out In the Wilderness"

MY SERMON this morning is going to be a bit different. As you listen to it, I invite you to use your imagination.

"IN THOSE DAYS, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

"REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR."

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS:
PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'"

THAT WAS THEN, almost two millennia ago. THIS IS NOW in the year 2011! Can you imagine what it would be like if John the Baptist appeared on earth today?

Can you imagine God's prophet John, the "forerunner" of Jesus Christ, suddenly appearing here in Plymouth, this very day, to preach the urgent Word of God? Here's how I imagine such an event, in my mind's eye.

CHRISTMAS IS COMING and children all over Plymouth are beginning to daydream about a red-suited Santa, reindeer, and toys--heaps of Christmas toys. Today is December 4th. After Sunday dinner today people all over town begin their Christmas activities.

Some get busy decorating their homes with pine-scented greens. Others go to shop for brightly-wrapped presents. Others head off for yuletide parties. Plymouth is a-buzz with activity.

SPIRITS ARE RUNNING HIGH--and so are tempers. Parents grow weary as they drag their screaming, squirming offspring past yet another Christmas toy display.
"GIVE ME THAT!
NO, NOT THAT TOY! I WANT THAT OTHER ONE FOR CHRISTMAS!"

Brakes squeal as cars nearly collide in over-crowded parking lots. Drivers yell and shake their fists at one another.

"HEY, BUDDY,
WHERE'D YOU GET YOUR DRIVER'S LICENSE--DISNEY WORLD?"

Angry words are heard in homes: as Christmas cookies burn, as wrapping paper rolls go empty, as cocktail glasses fall and shatter on the floor.

PLYMOUTH IS FILLED with bustling holiday activity--and noise.

But then something strange begins to happen. Whether waiting in a drugstore prescription line, or out purchasing a Christmas tree, or chopping celery sticks at home--people suddenly do a "double-take."

People are startled, because suddenly they become aware of a still, small voice. Hardly more than a whisper, that voice calls to them, saying: "Repent, Repent..."

At first, people turn around to see who's speaking to them. But no one's there! Then, shaking their heads, they turn back, to all their holiday busyness. Meanwhile, something gnaws at them, deep inside.

People SIGH! They stroke their worried brows, and secretly hope that Christmas will, indeed, be different this year.

ALL AROUND THE PLYMOUTH REGION, TV's are tuned to "The Christmas Carol." You and I are watching it too. The Ghost of Christmas Future is just about to appear, when suddenly there's a news flash:

WE INTERRUPT THIS PROGRAM, TO BRING YOU THIS BREAKING NEWS.

HELLO, I'M ANDERSON COOPER.
AT THIS MOMENT, ERIN BURNETT, OUR HELICOPTER NEWS REPORTER IS ON THE SCENE. COME IN, ERIN. TELL US WHAT'S HAPPENING.
"Well, Anderson, it's amazing! Early this afternoon a man ignited a huge bonfire on Long Beach in Plymouth, Massachusetts. A great plume of smoke is now rising into the sky over that coastal community.

That beach is usually desolate this time of year. But Plymouth police and area neighbors spotted the smoke, and hurried over there.

The Police questioned the man. He claims he's John the Baptist, returned to earth. I must say, that he certainly looks the part. His hair's all stringy and long. He's dressed in a rough fur tunic and leather sandals. He also claims that he loves to eat locusts--when they're in season, of course.

At the moment the man is tending his roaring bonfire with a forked stick. And he's walking back and forth along the shore-line, preaching to a crowd of onlookers. Drawn by all the smoke, the crowd is growing larger by the minute.

There's a great sense of urgency in the man's thunderous voice. The Police have warned him about burning without a permit. But at the moment, they're much more concerned about controlling the growing crowd.

EXCUSE ME FOR BREAKING IN HERE ERIN, BUT WHAT'S THIS SELF-PROCLAIMED JOHN THE BAPTIST BURNING?

Well, Anderson, that's amazing too! As he told the crowd, he's burning a great heap of unsolicited, multi-color, Christmas junk mail, As the man said: they're all flyers, brochures, and catalogs which proclaim:

"BUY-BUY-BUY...EAT-EAT-EAT!
PLEASURE, CONSUMPTION, AND PROFITS ARE THE REASON FOR THE SEASON!!"

I SWITCH OFF the TV set. You and I are both excited and curious. We climb into my minivan and we head down to Long Beach. We're amazed by all the people we meet on the road,
who have the same idea.

We arrive at the beach. The first thing we SEE is all the cars parked along the road and TV news helicopters flying overhead. The first thing we HEAR is the booming voice of that man John. He cries out,

"REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR."

DON'T WAIT! TURN YOUR LIVES AROUND!
OPEN YOUR HEARTS...FOR GOD IS COMING!

The beach grass quivers at the sound of John's voice. Looking around, we're amazed at the spectrum of people who've been drawn there. We see:
--well-groomed men and women in sleek winter parkas;
--teenagers with high school letter jackets;
--people with canes; and even some
--punk rockers with their hair dyed pink.

JOHN CONTINUES TO PREACH. All the while, he keeps poking at the bonfire with his forked stick. The fire crackles and clouds of red-yellow sparks fly up to heaven.

Some people snicker to see such a likeness of a 1st century "wild man." They figure, that what this poor, homeless man really needs is: a good meal, decent clothes, and a roof over his head.

Other people listen to John with their mouths wide open. They hope against hope, that he really is, who he says he is.

You and I don't know what to think. So we take a seat with the crowd on the sandy brown beach, and we listen very carefully. Actually, the warmth of that roaring bonfire feels good to us, on this chilly December day.

PREACHING TO THE CROWD, with his thunderous voice, John says:

What do you think? Do you think God really cares, about how many CHRISTMAS COOKIES you bake--or burn?
Do you think God really cares, about how much money you spend on Christmas presents, or how many Christmas decorations you display in your homes?

Every year, in the great Christmas rush, you hand your lives over to such concerns. You fuss and fume and drive yourselves to exhaustion.

Yet, all too often you neglect the most important thing. For I tell you: the one thing God really does care about--above all else--is you!

God cares about your soul! God wants to be invited into your heart.

But God can't enter into your heart, if there's no room. God can't enter in, if you've filled your lives to overflowing, with holiday trappings and distractions.

JOHN POCKES AT HIS BONFIRE again. There's a hiss. And another shower of sparks swirls heavenward. John continues:

DON'T YOU know that God knows what you really need--deep inside you?
And don't you know that God will provide for you?

You Plymoutheans marvel at your holly trees which bring forth such beautiful red berries and shiny green leaves in this season. Even Donald Trump with all his wealth, can't create a single one of those trees.

Yet, God creates those trees all the time. And so God will provide for you. For humans are much more precious than holly trees--and far more precious than all the tinsel and baubles, which often come with this holiday season!

I SAY TO YOU PEOPLE: REPENT! OPEN YOUR HEARTS TO GOD!

IN YOUR MODERN CHRISTMAS WILDERNESS--SO FULL OF CLUTTER--MAKE STRAIGHT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD...FOR GOD IS COMING!

AS I LISTEN TO JOHN'S PREACHING, I can't help but remember an older teenager I once knew. Let's call him Keith. Keith was
a kind, idealistic young adult who always looked forward to Christmas.

Keith loved to imagine the Nativity story: the mysterious star-spangled heavens, the angels bending low to Earth, and the little baby Jesus asleep on the hay. That baby was so full of God's love, that Keith could just imagine gathering that child in his arms--and giving him a big hug.

One Christmas Eve, Keith's parents disagreed about where to put the Christmas tree--by the stairway or near the piano. They also disagreed as to how to decorate that tree--with tinsel or without it.

As it happened, those disagreements led his parents to be very angry with each other. Their anger soon turned into shouting and considerable unkindness to each other.

KEITH SCREAMED FOR HIS PARENTS TO STOP all their fighting. Then he grabbed his coat and ran out into the night. Sick and saddened inside, Keith walked in the cold for a long time--down empty streets. It was snowing big puffy flakes of snow. Keith left the house so fast, that he forgot his hat and gloves.

It was Christmas Eve. But Keith's world seemed so broken. He was so unhappy. Suddenly, in the darkness, and seemingly out of nowhere, a car pulled up beside Keith. It was a high school friend. That friend offered Keith a ride.

But Keith, a bit embarrassed, said "no," he wanted to walk alone and think for awhile.

As Keith started to walk away, his friend jumped out of the car. The friend thrust his own hat and gloves into Keith's hands. Keith was startled. As the friend said,

"IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE OUT TONIGHT, AT LEAST YOU CAN BE WARM."
As the car's red tail-lights disappeared into the night, Keith clutched at his friend's hat and gloves. It was hard to explain, but that simple act of caring, brought a deep sense of peace to Keith. His utter despair began to fade away.

To Keith, it seemed as though a shining ray of God's love, had suddenly broken through the terrible darkness of spirit, which enveloped him.

Remembering that it was Christmas Eve, Keith felt as though the Christ child had reached out, and was now hugging him.

Keith put on his friend's warm hat and gloves. But now, things were different. For, somehow deep in his heart, Keith now knew, that whatever he had to face when he returned home, he would be all right.

THINKING ABOUT KEITH'S EXPERIENCE that Christmas Eve, I am reminded that God's grace has often come into my life, through such small acts of human caring.

For example, I've experienced God's grace, in the simple act of a loved one sharing a meal with me; --I've experienced that grace, in words of kindness spoken by a friend or even a total stranger; --I've even experienced that grace, in the trusting, happy look of a grandchild, who eagerly reached up to grab hold of my hand, as we walked along together.

Through such small acts of human caring, God's grace can come to us. God's grace can come to us, --bringing us peace, --letting us know that God loves us, and, --giving us assurance, that whatever happens, we will be all right.

JOHN THE BAPTIST TOSSES ANOTHER PILE of Christmas junk mail onto the bonfire. Black paper ash flies everywhere. Our eyes begin to water. John's thunderous voice booms out again. As he declares:
GOD IS COMING!...BUILD GOD'S HIGHWAY INTO YOUR HEART, WITH DEEDS OF LOVE, FORGIVENESS, AND FAIRNESS!

John continues. As he says:

Likely you all have a Christmas shopping list and a “to do” list for decorating your houses. I say, put those lists aside for the moment, and make yourself another Christmas list—a list that matters much more to God. To make up this other list, ask yourself these questions:

Is there someone you have wronged? --If so, then go to that person this Christmas, and express your genuine remorse. Make amends wherever you can.

Is there someone who has hurt you? --If so, then in this season of Christ’s birth, take the first step, in your own heart journey, to forgive that person. And whenever it is possible, be reconciled with others.

Are there people in need, whom you can help through deeds of kindness? If so, then do such deeds—at Christmas, and throughout each year!

I SAY TO YOU: GOD IS COMING! YOU CAN COUNT ON IT.
SO, OPEN YOUR HEARTS TO GOD!
AND DO THE DEEDS, WHICH ARE WORTHY OF REPENTANCE!

THE CROWD WATCHES INTENTLY as John bends down to pick up an empty quahog shell from the shore. John fills the shell with ocean water, then with two hands, he lifts it up before the crowd. In a solemn voice John says:

IF YOU WILL OPEN YOUR HEARTS TO GOD,
THEN COME FORWARD, AND RECEIVE THE BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE.

I baptize you simply, with water, as a sign of your readiness to receive God. But our God baptizes you with the Holy Spirit and fire. All is ready. Come forward.

People on the beach begin to rise and go forward. Television crews hurry to find the best camera positions.
Within minutes a long line has formed before John. People with canes, pink hair, sleek parkas, and letter jackets all stand together.

You and I feel moved to enter this line. The truth of the matter is that we're weary of our Christmas wilderness. We're weary of chasing after holiday excesses. We're weary of that, when, at the same time, something very deep inside us, goes un-nourished and un-fulfilled each year at this time.

The line moves forward slowly, until finally you and I appear before John. Like those before us, we kneel in the sand. We stretch out our clasped hands. John asks us if we will repent--if we will truly turn our lives around, to receive God?

We answer John, saying that we will, with God's help.

JOHN DIPS HIS QUAHOG SHELL into the ocean for each of us. Then he pours the shell's water over our clasped hands. At first, that water sends a shiver right through us--it's so cold. But then, it makes us feel refreshed and renewed.

We'd like to stay near John. We'd like to continue watching this strange wild man with his booming voice and crackling bonfire on the beach. But the crowd pushes behind us. We need to give up our places to others.

AS YOU AND I DRIVE AWAY, we can still hear John's words, echoing in our hearts: "Repent, Repent."

As you and I both agree: we're going to make sure, that Christmas really is different for us, this year!