

**Sermon for Diocesan Confirmation – Dec. 9, 2012**  
**The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, Ga.**  
**The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright**  
**Bishop of Atlanta**

## **“The Word, the Wilderness and the World” (Luke 3.1-6)**

Good afternoon.

Les saludo en el nombre del Senor Jesus Christ.

Pay attention to John the Baptist. He is a fascinating man. He's dressed up in vintage clothing. He looks like yesterday. He looks like yesterday, but he's talking about today. He's planting a flag in right now. He was raised in the church like many of us. But like many of us, for one reason or the other, he left the church. Maybe he needed the space from mom and dad to confirm his own relationship with God. Maybe the worship of his home church had grown cold with intellectualism, or weak with sentimentalism. Maybe he was looking for more God than the church was prepared to offer. In our terms today, you could say, John is spiritual but not religious. The funny thing is, John finds that the God of his childhood, the God of his mother and father, the God of the church is exactly the same God he finds outside of the church. God ever living, ever loving God. God always speaking, always extending mercy. God finding us wherever we are. He finds sin-purging, fellowship-binding, love-enlarging God. Generosity-compelling, faith-growing, servant-inspiring God. John never used those words. Those are my words. That's been my experience. How about you? What are your words to describe God?

Maybe you're like John, a person of few words. John's career as a preacher was short, and he only had one sermon. His one sermon only had one word. A one word sermon? Introduction, body, restatement of thesis and conclusion all in one word. Every day John would stand up and say, to anyone who would listen, repent. The other six days of the week, repent. Twice on Sunday, repent, repent. It's a hard word but it's the right word. So much of God is hard, but brings life and joy. Wouldn't want to try life without him. Repent is to change direction. Repent re-describes reality. Repent is to count God and life with God better than our present directions. Repent is a militant word. To repent is medicine to our spirit and everything we touch. It's like love to the loveless. Like home to an orphan. To receive John's one-word sermon is to say yes to a Holy Spirit x-ray. See me and know me God, tell me where I am off base. Where I am strong give me more strength. Where I have needs God, meet them. If I am found to be selfish God,

enlarge my heart. Where I'm broke, fix me God. Above all, help me to see more of you God. I can see why we are still talking about this one-word sermon from 2,000 years ago. Can't you? A whole life with God in one word. It's was the right word. It still is the right word. It prompts us reflect and to pray. Demands to go to the top of our to-do list. To repent is to ask God, What do you think?

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Before John shares the word, the word came to John; that's what the Bible says. Every preacher knows you cannot preach what you do not know, nor can you come back from where you ain't been. The best words we have come from God. The thought of it blows my mind. The creator of all the worlds has addressed us, is addressing us. Now! The one who hung the stars, moons and planets in their courses like Christmas tree lights is speaking to us!

Who are we that God is mindful of us, and that God answers when we call? Have we been so faithful? Who are we that God sets his lively words in the midst of all our dead words? Who are we that God trusts us with his words? Love, forgive, bless, build, repair, rejoice. Are we so trustworthy? You be the judge. Or is it that God is just that good? Good beyond good! The same word that came to John then comes to us now. Always has. Four times this afternoon we've heard from Holy Scripture, God's word. If you include the music, and I do, the prayers and Communion, you and I have been saturated in God's word. Thanks be to God. We are the object of God's outreach. We are being pursued by goodness and mercy. That's enough to make an Episcopalian shout "Hallelujah!" And, some of us are allowing God to catch up with us. When you multiply that with all the places all over the world where God's word is being truly preached and truly heard, it boggles the mind how much God desires for God's people to know him, to love him, to love themselves and for us all to love our neighbors.

But here's the part that really gets me. The word of God came to John in the wilderness. How poetic. The word of God broke into desolation. Nothingness was penetrated and gave birth to something. Abundance flourished where there wasn't even survival. The poet Isaiah tried to wrap words around it. He failed. All he could say is when the word comes, valleys want to rise and salute. Mountains are embarrassed at their height in the presence of word. Both crooked and rough places want a total makeover when the word of God comes. When complete comes all that is partial has to step aside. Make myself plain? The word of God brings laughter to the depressive, joy to the bankrupt and peace to the dying. It's a GPS for the lost,

release for the trapped, worthiness for the unworthy. You want some good news? Darkness is not dark to God, and wilderness is not wilderness to God. Wilderness is the necessary precondition for joy! Let me say to you this afternoon, if you find yourself in a wilderness season, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, God does God's best work in the wilderness. In the wilderness is where all the distractions burn away. I'm not surprised God's word came to John in the wilderness. We can hear better in the wilderness. What is God saying to you?

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More than 130 of you have come to this cathedral to be confirmed, received, reaffirmed and baptized. It's glorious to see you all, from all over the diocese. You have been in my thoughts and prayers. You have been prepared, you have studied and you have been prayed for. And, we are proud of you. But I have a question for you? What will you do with all this prayer and study? What difference will it make to the world? If these spiritual milestones are anything, they are a commitment to a mature and public faith. Look at John. God found him in the wilderness with his wonderful word. He could have lived a quiet faith thereafter. Could have gone back to the church and sat down. Could have aspired to be a good person, though I confess to you I don't know what a good person is. Never met one. No, John immediately starts making a difference in the world. Out to the region around the Jordan John went. The suburbs and the exurbs. Out into the world to make a difference. He goes out as himself not as a religious cliché. But, he was transformed by the renewing of his mind. He doesn't have all the answers. He's had an experience. When God's word comes to you, you begin to love what God loves. That's the test. And God loves the world. I'm sure of that. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. God loves the world. In just a few weeks we will hear the angelic tabernacle choir sing to some shepherds, *"Don't be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people."* God is moving us all closer to a day where all kinds of people will see and understand God's salvation. All kinds of people. I wish the church loved the world more. But the church can, if you will.

If you will offer yourself today as you come for Confirmation, Reception, Reaffirmation and Baptism. Offer yourself as God's next John. Envision yourself putting your life in your hands and simply offering it to God. And as you envision that, say something like, "To you O Lord, I lift up my soul, my God I put my trust in you." Or if you want options, say this, "God, melt me, mold me, fill me, use me." John must have done something like this because God did use him to change the world. John's faith changed other people's lives. Will yours? Has yours? You don't

have to invent the next best technology to change the world. You don't have discover the cure for cancer to change the world. You don't have to give away the most money, build the tallest building or fill every hungry stomach to change the world. John changed the world by telling the world what God told him. John shouted from the rooftops what God whispered to him: that anywhere you go, I am already there. That I have already forgotten all of your past sins. That you are free. That the cynics are wrong and to hope is right. And that there is a love that changes everything. You don't have to earn it. You can't be good enough to deserve it. It's a gift. It's a word that comes to broken people like us, so it can connect with the broken people of the world. Thanks be to God. A wise man put it this way, "I was dead and then I was alive. I was weeping, then I was laughing. Love came into me and I became fierce like a lion and gentle like an evening star."

"O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise, the glory of my God and king the triumphs of his grace." AMEN