

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ² “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” ³ He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”

⁴ John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. ⁶ As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷ Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹ And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”



Today, as we turn to the story of John the Baptist, it is a “once upon a time” moment. When we hear those words, we know that a good story is coming. Such is the case today.

Such was John's mission. We like stories because they often contain wonder. Stories in general communicate deep truths about ourselves and about our communities. Stories help us understand how we relate to one another. In the context of the Bible, stories help us to understand what it means to believe, and they teach us how our lives embody our faith. As we enter into this time, considering the story in Matthew 3 as well as our own stories, let us come together in prayer...

God of mercy, your realm has drawn near. Help us prepare a way for you to enter our minds and hearts, a way for you to enter the world with might for the sake of justice, mercy and peace. Help us repent. Grant us hearts of faith. It is with these requests that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

As we turn to John 3, we find John the Baptist. He is a locust-and-honey-eating prophet out in the wilderness, calling people to come and change their stories. John invites us to redefine our "once upon a time" in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. This time of year, it is an invitation that we need to hear. We can get caught up in our own stories, in the busyness of our lives in the middle of the Christmas season. As we pause to consider the story of Advent and the coming of a new kingdom here on earth, John comes alongside us to tell us that we are not quite ready. At least that is the message that he preached out there in the wilderness.

John the Baptist was saying as much as he stood in the wilderness, along the Jordan River, proclaiming, "*Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!*"



Even though the people of God were physically living in the Promised Land, they weren't spiritually living as the people of God. This was because even though they knew the promises of God, they weren't living into the promises of God. Sometimes we can have this struggle too. We can know that God loves us unconditionally, for example, but can fail to fully trust into that during a really difficult or trying time in our lives. We can know the promises and the stories but can struggle to believe that they fully apply to us and to our lives. While we know in our hearts that the kingdom of God is already part of our present reality, some of the time we do not live that out in our day to day lives. So, at times, we need to once again hear the call of John the Baptist.

As we continue in the story, Matthew identifies John as the one of whom Isaish spoke. Here Matthew is connecting his Jewish audience into the words of one of their greatest prophets. Quoting from Isaiah 40, Matthew names John the Baptist as the one who is being sent ahead of the Messiah. His mission is clear: "*Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.*" Matthew is naming John as the one sent by God, as the one who comes to help people ready their hearts for the coming of the Messiah. John's call to "*change hearts and lives*" was a call to straighten oneself out, to make one's heart ready to receive the Savior.

Even though John was quite odd, even by the standards of his day – with his wild hair and wild dress, with his diet of locusts and wild honey – he tapped into a felt need. His call and announcement that the kingdom of heaven was near resonated with the deep longings of the people of God. His message of good news spoke to the people's hearts. That is what drew people from Jerusalem and from all over Judea to come out into the wilderness. The promise of the kingdom and of one who saves – that was the attractional part of John's message. But there was also another part of John's message.

Oh yes, the kingdom is about to come near. Hallelujah and amen! But... But, John said to the people, but you are not ready to receive this coming kingdom and the one who brings it, the Lord. There was the small detail, that first part of John's proclamation: "*Change your hearts and your lives!*" This call to change tempered the excitement of a new, coming kingdom. The call to change implies that something is wrong or broken. It implies that something or some things need fixed. The call to repent – to confess and to change – means feeling sorry and making the decision to walk in a new way.

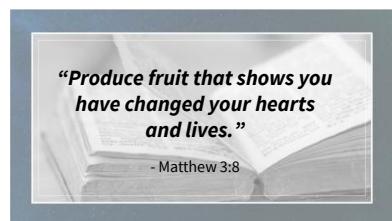
The process of repentance, of changing hearts and lives, it leads to a willingness to live by a different story. So more than a condemnation of last sins and behaviors, John is really offering an invitation to a better story. Although John himself didn't really know exactly what this new kingdom of God would be like, John knew that it would be far better than their present reality. John knew that the coming Messiah would bring a new way of living and being in the world. In this sense, John was inviting the people of God to make a turn, to veer off the path that they were on, to follow a new sign, a new hope. In the long run, John's invitation was to get on board, to grasp hold of what was about to come, to prepare oneself to be a part of this new kingdom of God made real in Jesus.

John's message of hope connected to the Old Testament prophecies and promises. It was this hope that drew in the crowds. Large numbers of people were coming, confessing, committing to change their lives, wading into the water to be baptized in the waters of the kingdom of heaven. It must have been a wonderful sight to behold. In verse 7 we even read that many Pharisees and Sadducees were also coming out into the wilderness. When we hear that these religious leaders came out, well, we often want to condemn them or to question their motives. We do this because of John's reaction to their presence.

But we do not read that they stood there on the bank, condescendingly looking down on John and those wading into the water. We do not read that these religious leaders were passing judgment on John or that they were trying to prevent the crowds from coming forward. The scripture says just the opposite: “*they came to be baptized by John.*” It is right there in verse 7. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized.

But John, he yells at them, calling them “*children of snakes.*” He asks who warned them about needing to escape the wrath and judgment that was coming soon. Umm, if they were paying attention, like everyone else who came out to be baptized in the Jordan, then it was John who warned them. It was John the Baptist who called out to the Pharisees and Sadducees as well, saying, “*Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!*” These religious leaders, deep in their hearts, also longed to see things change, to see a restoration of the people of God.

In verse 8 we see why John reacted this way. John says to the religious leaders of his day, “*Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.*” John adds this charge to the call to confess and repent, to change hearts and lives. For those who bear more responsibility because of their position, because of who they are, because of who they claim to be, John says to them, show that you have indeed made the turn. Live differently. Do not just say that you have changed, prove it by the way that you are living and leading. John then warns them, telling them plainly that simply claiming Abraham as their father will not save them from the ax that is “*already at the root of the trees.*” Changing hearts is not enough. Lives must be changed as well. John tells the religious leaders that the one he is preparing the way for will “*baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” It will be a refining and cleansing fire.



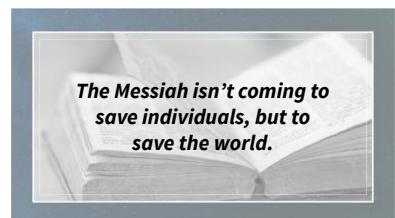
Jesus' cleansing fire will be a fire "*that can't be put out.*" John is laying out the cost of discipleship. He wants the Pharisees and the Sadducees to know that once Jesus gets ahold of them, baptizing them with the Spirit and with a fire from God, that their lives will be changed forever. This will be a big change if they choose to enter into a relationship with the coming Messiah.

For John, as long as these religious leaders are still a part of a system that is oppressing the people of God, then he will not accept that their repentance is for real. For John, the story that the Pharisees and Sadducees are telling with their lives is very different from the story that John says is about to unfold. The stories told by the lives of the religious leaders are much different than the unfolding story that they say they want to join.

Through his questions and through the challenges that he gives, John is digging a little deeper too. He is asking the religious leaders to dig a little deeper. He is getting personal. John is challenging the religious leaders and the way that they are currently living their lives. It is hard when it gets personal. Imagine being in that place for a moment. You are here in church on Sunday morning. You are desiring to grow closer to God and to be more like Christ in your daily living. Your spouse or significant other or parent appreciates that you are making the effort, that you are coming along with them. But later this afternoon, when you get upset with your team or when you say something that hurts their feelings or when... and they call you out for that. They point out that you were in church that morning, but it sure doesn't look like it that afternoon. When it gets personal, it is much harder.

John the Baptist wants the religious leaders to understand that this won't be an easy ride. He wants them to know that to produce fruit that shows that they have changed their lives will put them at odds with the current occupying forces. John wants the Pharisees and Sadducees to understand that choosing this new, coming kingdom will place them in opposition to the Romans. It will not be a walk in the park. There will be a cost. Here I think John sounds a bit like the prophet Haggai, speaking truth to a group that maybe doesn't really want to hear it. Because these men bear added responsibility because of where they stand in that culture, John wants them to clearly understand what they are saying 'yes' to. The story is just getting started. The reality of this new kingdom will unfold as Jesus begins to minister, revealing just how revolutionary this love of God really is.

As we continue, let us unpack a few key ideas that lie beneath the surface of this passage and that run consistently throughout the scriptures that we read this week in Isaiah 11, Psalm 72, and Romans 13. First, these texts remind us that *the Messiah isn't coming to save individuals, but to save the world*. Themes like "healing" and "salvation" were never merely meant for an individual. They are about human society as a whole. In the prophetic message in John's proclamation, salvation isn't about God rescuing us from the world's threats. It is about re-creating a world that's not so threatening. It is about creating a world that is filled with good works that yield the fruit that John calls for our lives to produce. In our Isaiah 11 passage for this week, it is about creating a world without violence and division. It is about the shoot from Jesse's stump that will lead a world in which the wolf will live with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat. In this week's verse from "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," it is about the key of David that will free the captives from their prisons and will "conquer death's deep misery."



In each of these examples, salvation is God's work, but we have to cooperate in that process and in the transformation that follows. We have to live daily as people seeking and working to establish and maintain justice. Our work will be done when there are just relationships amongst all of people of the world and throughout all of creation.

The second theme that runs throughout our texts this week is this:

God's justice doesn't mean everybody gets what they deserve, but that everybody gets what they need. In our world today, this means offering care for the poor and powerless and making sure that those who have been excluded from resources, safety, power and belonging now have a place at the table. In Psalm 72 we read that the just king's way of ruling will cause rains and showers to fall upon the earth, leading to the flourishing and prospering of all peoples.

God's justice doesn't mean everybody gets what they deserve, but that everybody gets what they need.

The coming reign of justice and righteousness will also bring an end to the violence of our world. Through the king's justice, the psalmist tells of a time when there will be an eradication of the abuse of power and discrimination against outsiders. Both Isaiah and the Psalmist emphasize the connection between nonviolence and justice. When Paul encourages harmony with the Gentiles in Romans 13, he doesn't mean just the non-Jews. In this passage, Paul means all outsiders. Today that would include everyone who we consider "not one of us." When Paul encourages us to welcome others just as Christ welcomed us, he is reminding us that Christ welcomed one and all. We are called to do the same.

Our society is clearly a long way from justice for all and a long way from Isaiah's vision of nonviolence spreading through the world, so as a society we need to change our ways. As a culture, we need to collectively repent.

In Matthew 3, when John the Baptist speaks of the one coming after him, he talks about repentance and justice as both personal and social transformation. He uses agricultural images of change and growth. The image of trees cut down is not a warning of the fires of hell, but about pruning and working with growing plants to produce more abundant crops. The image of the threshing floor is not so much about separating “good people” from “bad people” but about sifting our lives to bring forth what is fruitful and to discard what is not. The images of cutting trees and of burning the husks are not images of judgment and destruction but images of growth, change, and fruitfulness. John is speaking of how we are to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord.

We close with a practical illustration first. When we’re expecting guests to come stay with us, we clean the house. In a similar way, we prepare for the coming king by “cleaning house.” We clear out the unfruitful stuff and we establish fruitful habits. We strive to engage in just and life-giving actions. And we repent. But we keep in mind that repentance isn’t just self-criticism. It’s about making a change; it is about walking a new path.

This Advent, as we wait for Christmas, may we repent of waiting for Christmas to change us. We are the ones who make the changes. In this season, may our repentance be about changing negative behaviors, specific actions, bad habits, poor attitudes. To help frame this call to change, I offer a few questions: To make your life a welcome home for the living Christ, how do you need to repent? What do you need to clean up? Here are just a few examples of things that might need cleaned up: Despair, selfishness, self-doubt, worrying too much, caring too little, ignoring God’s cries for justice, trying to save the world all by yourself.



We all have our own stories. Each of us has a different mess to clean up, different stuff to throw out, different dead branches to prune. The gift of God's grace is that the very things we need to change to prepare for Christ's coming are the very things Christ desires to change in us. Because of this, Christ is in us, already working that transformation. The one who is soon to come is already present. Being present within us, the coming one helps us to prepare our hearts to receive the newborn king so that Christ may lead and guide our lives. May that be the story that we choose to live this Advent. Alleluia and amen!

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow.* How is repentance currently linked to your experience of salvation? How was it different in the past? What led to you change in understanding?
- 2) *Pray.* Who are today's "Pharisees and Sadducees" – people who talk the talk but fail to walk the walk? Spend some time in prayer for new depths of relationship with Jesus.
- 3) *Study.* Read John 3:13-17. Why do you think Jesus thought he needed to be baptized? And... How does God speak verse 17 over you again and again?