

Matthew 3:1-12
Advent 2, Dec. 7 2025
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Every year it's missing. When we pull out the Christmas decorations, among the table centerpieces, lights and stockings, nestled in newspaper are the figurines of the manger scene. But there is always someone missing. Sure there are magi, a few shepherds, probably an angel, some sheep, and maybe a cow or donkey. There's Mary and Joseph and a babe lying in the manger. But someone is missing. Not once have I seen a nativity set with a wild-eyed guy, lurking in the desert with a camel hair coat and a plate of locusts in front of him. John the Baptist. Missing from every manger scene.

But you see we can't get to Christmas without him. It doesn't matter that the carols played over the intercom at the mall don't include him. It doesn't matter that he doesn't show up as a Christmas tree ornament. John is not peripheral to Christmas. Two gospels, Matthew and Luke, recount the story of a young girl who gives birth to a babe, but all four, that's right, all four tell of the one who shouts in the desert, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." John is the one we need to hear if we are to be prepared for Jesus. Forget the tree, the lights, the Christmas oranges and turkey suppers. Don't sweat the gifts and parties. Pay attention to John if you hope to be ready when we get to the manger.

Maybe you think John is more like the Grinch who stole Christmas. After all, here we are less than 3 weeks away from Christmas, and we've got some wild man in the desert shouting to repent. What has this got to do with "Silent Night, holy night? All is calm, all is bright?" All the more disturbing, John comes on the scene every year on the Sunday we light the candle of peace on our Advent wreath. There seems to be little about peace in this guy. Fire... confrontation...that's what this guy is about. Decision...he's calling people to choose. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!"

John says "repent" and we hear in our mind "bad boy" or "bad girl". John says repent and we hear "guilt." John says repent and we hear "you good for nothing." But when John says, "repent" he means not to terrify us, but to offer us life. Did you hear the image he uses? When John says, "repent" he is imagining a tree.

He tells his listeners to produce fruit in keeping (that is consistent, in harmony) with repentance. There is always a tension in Christian theology between God's grace and our works. John doesn't tell us that our works save us, but he does say that our repentance will produce good works. John is interested in only one thing; has our turn in life made a difference.

That's what repentance means. To turn, to change and be changed. It means to turn in a radically new direction. To pull a '180.' A reshaping of life and change of heart. John isn't asking for cosmetic surgery. He's not interested in repackaging the same old life we've always had. He's not interested in lives that include an hour of worship on Sundays that makes no difference in our relationships, work or leisure time. John's call isn't a touched up selfie, but a call to let God bear fruit in and through us...sweet and juicy lives turned away from the darkness of violence, self-centeredness, and meaninglessness.

We turn away from one way of life in order to turn *toward* something. John is calling the people to something deeper and truer. John is calling to the people to turn to God; to choose healing,

wholeness, forgiveness, Christ-centered meaning and living. God called to Abraham and Sarah: "Go from your country to a land I will show you." Take radical risks. To Moses he called: "Bring my people out of Egypt; away from the bondage of slavery, to a land they will call their own." Change direction... choose freedom. And Jesus' first words to his disciples "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Repent, turn, change. It is a thread that can be seen stitched through every square on the patchwork quilt of biblical faith. Turning away from sin...turning to God...turning, changing, and repenting.

Our passage tells us "in those days John the Baptist came preaching." What days? In the days Matthew has already begun describing in chapters one and two of his gospel. Trouble has started. A baby has been born to unwed teenagers. Matthew describes a paranoid dictator out to kill any infants who threaten his hold on power. Strange dreams forewarn the visiting maji to sneak home a different way. Jesus' own parents flee into political safety in Egypt. By the end of chapter two they have crossed back into Israel and are hiding out up in Galilee. "In those days" Matthew writes. It is in **those** days that John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. John doesn't start the trouble; the trouble has already begun.

Does it surprise you to refer to the coming of Jesus as trouble? This is not what we were expecting when we came to church this morning...not what we think we need in the midst of all the pre-Christmas rush. Or maybe it is what we need...what everyone who journeys to the Christ needs. A warning...a reality check. It is trouble for a world that wants to make its own rules because God has not left us on our own, but has come in flesh to save our world. It's trouble for religious people who go through the motions, but do not let God's love change them; those who bear no fruit.

If you think John is upsetting, just wait until you see how Jesus upsets things. John says "get ready...prepare yourself...I'm warning you...tomorrow's going to be too late." And within a page or two of Matthew's gospel Jesus is saying things like "Blessed are those who mourn...if someone takes your shirt, let him have your coat as well...love your enemies...do not worry about your life." Herod has reason to be afraid. The infant king to be born in Bethlehem is a threat. No question about it. His kingdom turns the world upside down. And John is right. If we intend to visit this king...if we plan to bring him gifts...then we must undertake preparations.

It would be a harsh message; one too great to bear, if God hadn't provided the way for our healing. This is the good news; that Jesus has come, and is coming again. The Saviour who has borne sin's weight and punishment for us. Trouble, if we ignore John's warning. Good news...life giving news when we heed the call. For do we not long for the chaff of our lives to be incinerated? To be refined like metal until our impurities are consumed. And with each refinement, we begin to reflect the glory of God even more. We begin to resemble the one we seek to follow, the Prince of Peace.

May it be so in our lives and in our life together this Advent. Amen

I am indebted to Rev. Ed Searcy of University Hill Congregation for many of the ideas contained in today's sermon. He preached on this passage December 6, 1998.