

A reading from the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, verses 1-12.

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." Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

This is the Word of the Lord.

Where do we find God *today*? Perhaps *the Magi* were led by a star two thousand years ago to a Bethlehem stable where they found God in the person of a newborn child. But few such signs lead us, so where do *we* find God? And what shall we expect? We are in the second week of advent, journeying on the way to Bethlehem to behold the promised child. As it turns out, the way to Bethlehem takes us through the desert. And in the desert we come across a strange character named John who provides us with an answer to these questions: Where do we find God? *We find God in repentance and in baptism – in the convergence of law and gospel.* What shall we expect? *Nothing less than the disruptive grace of God's kingdom breaking into our world.*

Not the answers you were hoping for, I'm sure. You're thinking, didn't he get the memo? "'Tis the Season to Be Jolly," and we get to come to church to hear about repentance and sin and a grace that might disrupt our holiday festivities?

Matthew begins this testimony with John in the wilderness, and the people who want to hear John must "go out" into the wilderness. Israel wandered in the wilderness, forty years of longing and anticipation, forty years that forged them into God's people. They went out, to be brought in. So it is with these people – when they go out into the wilderness to hear John's message, they are brought in to the unfolding drama of God's kingdom.

They may have gone out with expectations – whatever it is that they were looking for it is clear that John must have defied those expectations. What a strange figure John must have presented. Matthew tells us that he *appeared* out of the desert all wild-eyed and covered with camel hair. The biblical doppelganger of Elijah, John dunked people in the waters of the Jordan and preached fire-sermons that ushered in the age to come. And he did a lot of pointing. Particularly he pointed people toward their sin and repentance. He is the embodiment of the Hebrew prophet and their call to holiness. Holy people make us uncomfortable. In this morning's gospel lesson we are told that the Pharisees and Sadducees went out to hear John preach and receive his baptism. Perhaps they were curious, perhaps they were being seen – maybe it was a joke.

We are not taught much about the Civil War where I grew up. Californians were too busy surfing, tanning, and panning for gold in 1861 to pay much attention to what was going on in less fortunate parts of the country. But one story, perhaps apocryphal, that I learned was that in the first months of the Civil War, the Union and Confederate armies spent a fair amount of time sizing each other up. The Union capital, Washington DC, was protected by some 37,000 soldiers, and most of them were pretty green. General McDowell, had stalled and stalled, but finally decided to engage the Confederates who were blocking the road to this fair city. As it was told my elementary school self, the journalists and politicians and people around DC were as naive as the soldiers. Folks rode horses and drove wagons out near the battlefield to watch, with champagne and opera glasses and picnic baskets. They thought it was a lark, something to entertain – the thought that a real battle might break out apparently did not cross their minds.

When the fighting began, they were in for a rude awakening. Cannonballs landed, shots cut through bodies, bayonets pierced flesh, soldiers fell dead before their eyes. Terrified, the spectators fled back into the city. Some were captured as they ran. They discovered the brutality and terror of war, and it was jarring.

John the Baptist's fire sermon has a similar effect. His voice stands as a stark contrast to the soft and grace-filled notes of Advent. But if we refuse to hear his voice, we may miss everything. *"Prepare the way of the Lord."* *"Bear fruit worthy of repentance."* *"The axe is at the base of the tree."*

Why so caustic? Did people really make such a sharp distinction in their lives between right belief and right practice? Had they failed so badly at keeping God's law? Flannery O'Connor was once asked why she created such grotesque characters in her fiction, and she replied *"To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."* John is shouting and drawing vivid images of God's judgment.

Were those who heard him hard of hearing? Were they suffering from a spiritual blindness of the sort that the only remedy is a hard dose of the law with its demand of righteousness? I wonder if we suffer from that same deafness and blindness. John's message, coming as it does before Christmas, should give us pause to consider whether we really come to terms with the depth of our own sin. We are invited to consider whether our lives are consonant with the rule of God's kingdom revealed most clearly in the person of

Jesus.

We are forced into the wilderness in advent because wherever the gospel comes in its depths, it follows the proclamation of the law in its heights. Without law there is no gospel, and without John the Baptist preaching, we do not rightly hear Jesus following. We cannot receive the peaceable kingdom that Isaiah prophesied without first looking into the chaos, disorder, and darkness of our own lives. And so John comes to us not primarily as a people-saving preacher, but as a sin-damning preacher. And we need John to remind us again and again of the stinging indictments of God's law, without which we feel little need for the gospel. His words, like an axe, cut away at the possibility that God will be satisfied with a people who confess with their tongues but deny with their actions. Like them or not, these words won't leave us alone. Repent. Turn. Change your orientation – face God and open yourself to receive him anew. John doesn't mince words – he tells those who would justify themselves, “you look like snakes fleeing a forest fire”. He is not the prophet to tell us: “we need to accept ourselves just as we are.”

John the Baptist comes for a particular reason. To prepare people. To prepare us. And the way to prepare...was to repent. To turn away from self-focus and turn towards God with our whole lives, everything we are and everything we have.

Martin Luther wrote of John the Baptist,

“John was to accuse them all and convince them that they were sinners in order that they might know how they stood before God and recognize themselves as lost...In this way they were prepared to receive grace from the Lord.”

When we hear this message of repentance, the mental switch goes off. But interestingly, the people in our biblical scene don't pack up their opera glasses and picnic baskets and flee to the city. Matthew tells us that they are actually drawn to him. Apparently, and the secular historian Josephus confirms this, against all odds there's something of a revival. John's words are different from those that would soothe and comfort, but leave the hearer no different having heard them. Perhaps this is because when we allow the law to continually do its work of stripping, accusing, and condemning it causes us to flee toward the gospel to seek its resources and walk in its powers.

This is where we find hope in John's brash sermon. In telling us to bear fruit worthy of repentance, John is not confronting us with mere moralisms and a burdensome to do list. John knows that his message is not the last Word and that the baptism he offers is not the baptism Jesus offers. And so he finally turns from his message of the judgment of God to point to the sum of the promises of God. What John really says, of course, is that it's not about him. *“One is coming after me who is far greater, far more powerful, worthy of your worship.* John points away from himself and towards Jesus, which makes it far easier to listen to his voice. *Turn to God. Do it now. Prepare yourself for Christ's coming...* In pointing toward the law, John points toward all that we may do for God – in pointing toward Jesus he points toward all that God will do for us. And so repentance and bearing good fruit are not burdens to be laid on our backs. The prophetic call to turn and come back to God is not a call to change the world through our own strength and our own reserves – John calls us to repentance because *the world is being changed* by the one who is to come.

A friend recently recommended a book by Beldon Lane called *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. It's about what the author calls "desert spirituality," the experience of God in harsh or difficult places. And what he provocatively says is that "grace rarely comes as a gentle invitation to change. More often than not it appears in the form of an assault, something we first are tempted to flee..." We should expect that "God's grace comes sometimes like a kick in the teeth, leaving us broken, wholly unable any longer to deny our need." That sounds like John the Baptist's voice in the wilderness. "*God's grace comes sometimes like a kick in the teeth.*" And we, unable any longer to deny our need.

This is just such a great time of year, probably my favorite. I love the music, the lights, the beauty and wonder of it. But I need John the Baptist. We need him to strip us bare, to speak in a loud, clear voice and remind us of our propensity to live for ourselves, to urge us to turn towards God. We need to follow him to the wilderness, to take us to the edge of a chasm and make us stop and listen and see if perhaps, just perhaps we might hear another voice, faint but clear. The voice of Jesus saying "Come, follow me."

Let us pray.