

December 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

Preparing to Repent

“Repent!,” John the Baptist shouts at us during Advent. Over the Christmas music and the calls for Christmas cheer and the glitter of holiday lights, he shouts, “Repent! Change your ways. Change your lives. Start again. Turn back to God. The time is now!”

During the holiday season, John’s call to repent can sound a bit off. It strikes a bit of a sour note when he talks about sin and wrath and axes and burning fires. The atmosphere around him swirls with judgment and condemnation. He shouts Repent, and it brings up memories of my second grade teacher yelling at our class. Or the time when the man in the El Camino pulled up next to me and told me to stop riding my bike in the street. “Repent, you sinful sinner! Repent! Because if you don’t, the kingdom of heaven is near and boy, are you about to get it!”

That word, ‘repent’ carries some baggage with it. But today, I want to talk about how it’s not all bad. I want to reclaim the word and put it back in our Advent vocabulary. Because Advent is a time for straightening up and preparing. It’s a time to get ready for the coming kingdom of God.

And to do that, we look at our lives. We examine them. We refocus them. We listen to that voice in our hearts, the voice crying in the wilderness reminding us to prepare the way; for the Kingdom of heaven is near. And when it comes, it will change things. For the sake of goodness and life. For the sake of everyone. God will be with us, at home with us. But what state will things be in when God arrives. We need to prepare. We need to straighten up our hearts and spirits. We need to repent.

John the Baptist is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He prepares the way of the Lord and makes God paths straight. He helps us clear the way for God; so God can get to us, and we can get to God. John wants the people to remove all obstacles to God's grace and goodness. The ones we put up in front of ourselves or in front of others. The barriers we put up against the Spirit. Repent, John says, clear the way; make those paths straight. Like a trail crew at a state park or nature preserve, clearing brush and fallen limbs from the trails or buildings steps in steep areas, installing water bars to redirect water and keep the trail from

washing out. John the Baptist wants us to keep that path in shape and ready, so nothing within us can keep us from God.

Repent, John says. Rethink. Reconsider The word for repentance in Greek is metanoia. It comes from two root words, noieo which means to think and meta which means after. Metanoia means to think after. It means to think again, to go over your life and wonder if it's the life God wants you to live. Is this the way God wants me to go? And if it's not, then turn around. Repentance gets wadded up with guilt and shame. And feelings of self-hatred. It means saying, "Oh, woe is me, I'm a terrible person. A speck of dirt. A wormy piece of garbage. I don't deserve anything from God." And that's where people stay, in this emotional self-blame that passes as humility. But repentance is something more. It is thinking after, reconsidering and reassessing our way and our direction, in light of the kingdom of God, and then redirecting accordingly.

John the Baptist calls us to think again, to repair and refocus and recenter ourselves on God. It's time, he says. Today, he says, come to the river right now. Be baptized. Be washed and refreshed for a new life.

Start over, start again, right now with an abundant, kingdom of heaven life. That life is close at hand. Wash up and get ready for what God is about to do.

Advent is about preparing for something to change. It is about preparing ourselves to change. Every year, at this time, we go out to meet John at the river Jordan. We go with all the people from Jerusalem and Judea and ALL of the surrounding region. We go down to the river with them, drawn to John and his call to start over again. Because we know something isn't right. We know in our hearts that things aren't as they should be. In our own hearts, we know that the way things have been going is not God's way. It is not right or good. In our own lives, we have been too focused on silly things. Too focused on what the world expects. Too focused on things that will not give us peace or joy or life. We are too empty, too distracted, too overwhelmed. There has to be another way.

In June we found out my dad has cancer. It's in his face, in a nerve in his cheek and in the lymph nodes in his neck. They did surgery to remove all the cancer they could identify. And now he starts radiation next

week. This type of cancer is very aggressive, the doctor says. They will do everything they can to slow it down. This has been a voice crying in the wilderness for me. Repent. It's time to change. Because there isn't much time. Refocus. Reevaluate, the voice says. Say no to some things. Find the path with your dad. Have conversations. Keep company. Be with him while he is still here. Order your life accordingly.

Sometimes, the kingdom of heaven, is really, really close. And what matters becomes clear. All of a sudden, we see that our lives have been centered around the wrong things. They need to be recentered on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and faithfulness. The path that leads straight to God. This is what John the Baptist means when we says, Repent. This is what the crowds in our scripture want. They know that new decisions must be made, that things have to change. Maybe you know that too. Maybe you are here today because you are ready to start again, to find a new way with God.

There are people who are ready; but there are people who aren't ready. The Pharisees and Sadducees. John has special words for them. Because they are the ones who need to change. His strongest language is for

them. He calls them vipers and cowards. They think things are working the way they are. They won't change their way of power and privilege. They won't rethink or reconsider. They are Sons of Abraham. What other way is there to get to God? But think about this, John says, it doesn't mean they have God's blessing. Their lives are as fruitless. They are empty.

John's harshest criticism is for the religious, for the spiritual experts and leaders. It isn't for those on the outside, but for those on the inside. The ones who are supposed to know God, and are prepared to follow God's way. Who know it takes rethinking and reconsidering and repenting all the time. Because religion isn't meant to be a battleship, but a lifeboat. Not something that keeps people out, but helps them in. It helps them get to God. Our God makes a way where there is no way. Through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, through barrenness and exile, through darkness and suffering and death. Through the cross and the grave, God makes a way. And that is the way God's people are to prepare for.

It's the religious leaders that John threatens with the fire of judgment, the burning chaff, the axe at the base of the tree. They need to return to

God's promise. They need to start again with baptism into new life. But they don't want things to be new or different. They want to stay in control God's grace and to measure out God in itty bitty rations. They obstruct the way of the Spirit. They block the path of the coming kingdom, impeding those who want to find a way to God. They don't think repenting, rethinking, renewing their hearts is something for them. But it is for them. All of God's people are called to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And it will shake things up. It will disturb things. It will challenge our beliefs and purify our faith. And sharpen our senses. And remind us of what is true. That we are human. And divine. That we stand with one foot in this world and one foot in the next. And what is in between is a mystery. And Jesus shows us the way. He shows us how to love. How to rely on his peace. How to heal. How to trust that the mercy we give is the mercy we receive. And that mercy and grace is all around us, between us, behind us and before us. It is the way from us to God and from God to us. And it will lead us home.

John the Baptist calls us to return to this way. To repent and redirect our lives to the coming kingdom. To remember there is a different way. Like John, we are the voice crying in the wilderness, announcing that anyone can start again. There is still time. There is a way to reorder our lives. To remember who we are. To refocus on what is good and right. To turn and return to what matters. To think again about our lives and ask: what is at the end of my path? Where am I headed? Is it toward God? And is the way clear or is there something that stands in the way? Do my words match my values? Do my actions reflect what I believe? How can I change it so that they do? Every day, we start again. We repent. So that we are experts at it. So that we are so comfortable with it that it feels comfortable for others to do so too. So that it is full of hope and joy and grace. Because this is the way of the Lord.

The kingdom of heaven is near. And we must prepare. We must repent and be ready. And we must help one another to be ready for God to make a way. For a fresh start. A new life, a newborn child, revealing God's spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. Things can



change. They will change. God is clearing a trail to our salvation and the path is straight and clear.