

Sermon for Advent 2A
Sunday, December 4, 2022
“Prepare the Way”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I thought about today’s Gospel reading which features John the Baptist as the central character, I discovered a link between last week’s message and this week’s. Last week we heard about Jesus telling his followers to be prepared for that final day of judgement, to be ready for the end time. This week, John the Baptist calls people to repentance in order to prepare the way of the Lord. Both speak of preparation: the first demands us to make ourselves ready for the Lord, and the second demands us to redirect our attention as a necessary step in preparing the way.

We are introduced to an adult John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, who has a lot to say to the world to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. First, he takes them to the wilderness, away from the distractions of the city of Jerusalem; he takes them to a place where they might regain something that they have lost. People of his day were straying further and further from God and walking in his holy ways. He quotes the prophets of old, like Isaiah and Malachi, to remind them that they’ve been down that road before. Centuries before when their kings were doing evil in the sight of the Lord, resulting in God’s wrath manifesting itself by their being conquered by Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and the loss of the way of life that they loved. The prophets of old called the people to repentance to restore order to their world. John recalls those same prophets to call the people of his day to do the same. He takes them into the wilderness, away from their center of power, prestige, and comfort to the place where they had previously encountered God’s desire to care for his people. He took them there so that they could redirect their attention, through a change of life, a *metanoia*.

Metanoia means a complete turning around, a change of mind, a redirecting of one’s heart, soul, and mind, and a turning back toward God. When the people lost their way, a *metanoia* got them back on track. People were straying from the principles of the Law given to Moses at Mt. Sinai and were breaking the covenant promised by God to Abraham. They believed that the horrible things that were happening to them were evidence of God’s anger toward them. After years of exile in Babylon, oppression by Assyria and Egypt, and now occupation of their homeland by the Roman Empire, there was a feeling that God’s chosen people were being punished for having turned away from him. John was calling for the chosen people to repent of their sins and be washed clean, so things could once again be made right with God. If the covenant relationship with God could be restored, all would be well again.

John was a baptizer. Baptism was a familiar practice in Judaism long before its use in the Christian context as we now understand it. Baptism has its origins in the *mikvah* of Judaism. The *mikvah* was a ritual of purity, used regularly by the Essenes, which was a contemplative sect of Judaism—something like our monks or a religious

community. Gentiles who converted to Judaism were required to undergo that practice of ritual purification as part of their process toward conversion; men also underwent ritual circumcision. Those who were born Jewish did not go through such a ritual. So, the practice of baptizing became a call to repentance and restoration, and John was the guy near Jerusalem who did that.

John was preaching to the people to repent and return to the Lord by being ritually purified by water as a sign of their having made a change in their lives. In doing so, that which was lost to them would be restored, making life as beautiful as described by Isaiah: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.”

But, John also knew that something greater was on the horizon; someone greater than he was coming to baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire, to bring them into a better, stronger relationship with God. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance,” he said. In other words, let your lives show that you are in right relationship with God and with each other, or you may continue to bear the wrath of God. John uses the metaphor of fire to describe the wrath of God. But fire can be a source of renewal and not just a cause of destruction. The baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit that John predicted of the coming Messiah was one of renewal and rebirth for those who committed to a change of heart—a *metanoia*. In returning to God, that would bring about peace. Now for John and most of the people at the time, they might have presumed that peace meant the restoration of an independent Israel, free of Roman rule, prosperous, and able to live out the Law of the Torah without any barriers or distraction.

John’s message is relevant to us now. It does seem like we have lost our way in our own time. We hear more and more of people’s bad treatment of each other. The things in our lives seem to be spinning out of control. We are surrounded by reports of wars, economic woes and stressors, health challenges, changes to our lives and livelihood, loss of those we love, and a world that just doesn’t seem the same as it used to be. Then there are those things that seem to lure us: celebrity, power, money, wealth, greed, the latest electronic gadget, social media, politics. These are all things that distract us, much like what John the Baptist’s followers experienced in Jerusalem. John took them into the wilderness. We need to get away to a wilderness to help us to pay less attention to the distractors of our lives. That’s one of the reasons we are all here right now...I hope. We are here in this place in order to help us put aside the world’s distractions, to help us redirect our attention to God, to help us all face his cross, so that we can make a change of life, a *metanoia*, which will bring us into closer relationship with God.

Ask yourself, “How is my relationship with God? What can I do to help me be less distracted by the struggles going on in my life and focus my attention toward God?” Advent is our opportunity for us to think about our own *metanoias* and whether God is at the center of our attention or not. Are we making best use of our prayer lives and our spiritual lives, and where can we improve? Are we praying for our neighbors and those who seem to be causing us harm? How can we bring the message of returning to God out into the world to help bring about peace?

These are some of the questions that we might ask ourselves today in our attempt to prepare the way of the Lord. In our attempts for repentance and reexamination, we can then find an inner peace within ourselves. We must reorient our attention away from the distractions of the world and back toward God. Hopefully in doing so, we will live in the hope and peace of this Advent season as we prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word, for Advent 2 (Year A, Volume 1).

Arland J. Hultgren, “Commentary on Matthew 3:1-12” in *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1913.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-6>