

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ 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.' "

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, ⁹ and 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. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² 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."

Typical of last-minute Christmas shoppers, a mother was running furiously from store to store. Suddenly she became aware that the pudgy little hand of her three-year-old son was no longer clutched in hers. In a panic she retraced her steps and found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window. He was gazing at a manger scene. Hearing his mother's near hysterical call, he turned and shouted with innocent glee: "Look mommy! it's Jesus - baby Jesus in the hay." With obvious indifference to his joy and wonder, she impatiently jerked him away saying, "we don't have time for that!"

Joy and wonder—we do many things in preparation for Christmas symbolizing joy and wonder, hoping that doing so will infuse our feelings with an emotional high that we expect to have during the Christmas season. Unfortunately, our preparation for the celebration of Christmas sometimes robs us of the joy and wonder we seek.

Today's scripture lesson calls us to prepare for more than a holiday celebration. We are confronted by a message to prepare our hearts for an encounter with God, our one true God who came to earth as an infant through his Son, Jesus. It is a message calling us to, "Repent!" The message carrier is a rough-looking character. There was nothing festive looking about him. He wore the skins of camel held together with a strip of leather for a belt. He ate a steady diet of locusts and wild honey. The people called him the baptizer, and his message promoting this exercise sounded like criticism, "Repent!" he cried.

John the baptizer does not sound like a particularly appealing person that would attract people to come to see and hear him. I'm not so sure he would appeal to the interest of people today. So why did people swarm to him down by the river Jordan many years ago.

Some went because they were curious, but most Jews went because they recalled the words taught to them from the prophets, and markers in history that pointed to John as the fulfillment of prophecy. John brought-to-mind another who resembled him, Elijah. We read in 2 Kings 1:6-8 a story about king Ahaziah who was lying in his bed with an injury he acquired; and he sent messengers to consult the pagan god of Ekron, Ba'al-ze'bub to ask whether he will live or die. A man confronts them on the way. "Is there no God in Israel?" the man says. Why are you turning to Ba'al-ze'bub? This is the message you shall take to the king: "Therefore you shall surely die." The king asks them what sort of man he was—"A hairy man," they say, "with a leather belt around his waist." "It is Elijah the Tishbite," the king says.

Matthew's description of John the Baptist's appearance makes the point that John is like Elijah. The Jews would have made that connection, too. In fact, in John 1:21, John the Baptist was asked if he is Elijah; and he said, "I am not." The Jews had the expectation that Elijah would return prior to the time the Messiah would come and when the reign of God was at hand. Elijah's mission would be to bring reconciliation with God. In Malachi 4:5-6 we can read this prophecy: "'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

But John's similar appearance to Elijah was not the only thing he had in common with Elijah. Elijah admonished the king for forgetting God. John was reminding Israel that they are forgetting God again, and he confronts them with the need for repentance, and the time to do it was now, because the reign of God was at hand. The reign of God being, God's coming to earth. We understand that moment he spoke of as the birth of Christ, Emmanuel, God With Us. John asks, "Are you ready? Would you be ready to stand face to face with God?"

John confronts us with the same message, this morning, through this text. In this season, we are reminded that it is God who comes among us. It is his reign that is at hand. And if this is the reason for our joy, and it is, as all the lights and carols remind us. It is also reason for our repentance.

It is essential that we remember what it means to repent. It's like a husband and wife in a car. The wife tells her husband to turn right at the next junction and by mistake, he turns left. When he realizes what he has done, he says to his wife "I'm sorry love, I went the wrong way." But if that is all he does, it isn't enough. His saying sorry isn't getting them any closer to where they want to be; it isn't even stopping them from getting further away. To get where they want to be, he needs to stop the car, turn it around, and go back on to the correct road that his wife told him to take in the first place. That is repentance.

John's appearance and his message were very reminiscent of Elijah, the prophet that the Jews believed would return one day, when God's reign was coming. They came to see and hear John, believing the prophecy foretold them. The time had come. Many came to receive the baptism that John offered them. It was a symbol of their repentance, a sign of the washing away of the old self and a new commitment to change, "to make the path straight" towards God.

John's message also warns of judgement. We find that as we read that the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders with differing interests and beliefs, came to see and hear John, too. John's confrontation with the religious leaders was a bit more pointed. "You brood of vipers!" he shouted to them. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (v. 7-8). John accused them of talking the talk but not walking the walk. He told them that unless they honestly confessed their imperfections and wrong doings and turned themselves around to walk in the ways of God, he wasn't going to accept that they took his

baptism of repentance seriously. A judgement would be upon them—one that would separate them from God.

With similar words, John tells us we need to take an honest look at ourselves—not to find reasons to beat ourselves up because we recognize that we are not perfect, but so we will get in touch with our need for God, for his forgiveness and his guidance to walk in his ways in the glory of God's kingdom now and forever.

John also told the religious leaders that they could not use their heritage to Abraham as an excuse for having no need for repentance. They felt their heritage automatically placed them on the good side of God, making God's judgement on them a non-issue. Likewise, John would tell us that just because we call ourselves Christians, we are exempt from repenting because we are already on the God side of God. There certainly are days when we can look at ourselves in the mirror and recognize our sinfulness. We should never hesitate to repent again.

We are called to repent, allow a Godly change to take place in us, and go on to produce good fruit (3:10). You have to act like a Christian, too. You have to seek to speak what is true. You have to listen to God and his word and his Christ, and not to your own whims, whatever they might be any particular day. You must bend your knee and let God reign in your heart.

In verses eleven and twelve, John says, "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" (v. 11), Jesus. John recognizes that he is subordinate to Jesus; likewise, we all should be. As powerful as John's baptism is, it is designed to turn people away from sin and toward Jesus Christ.

John tells us that the baptism of Jesus is a new kind of cleansing—one that replaces water with "Holy Spirit and fire." Such a baptism eliminates impurities, much as a blazing fire purifies metal, and it fills people with the Holy Spirit of God.

The prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of John, saying "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" Over and over the scriptures confront us to prepare ourselves, making an opening for Jesus in our lives, and with him making a clear and straight path to God. That is what brings us real joy during the Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of our Savior and the presence of God among us. May John's message help you prepare for this great joy. Amen.