

December 4, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Savior God, guide us by your Word and Spirit, that we might hear your truth, heed your call, and be prepared for Christ's birth this Christmas. Amen.

A reading from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12. Listen now for the word of the lord.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "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. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, 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? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, 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. 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."

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This Advent, I've found myself reflecting on space. Physical space that we inhabit. Spaces that you walk through, that you rest in, that you live in, we are always in some kind of space.

And with that, has come the specific question that I've been pondering all Advent. What does it mean to think of Advent as physical, tangible space?

Advent is this liminal space of preparation; for what has already come, Christ, and what is yet to come, Christ. It's a space of paradox. A space that doesn't really fit in our day-to-day logical lives, so Advent emerges as a space to hold this paradoxical transition.

Admittedly, we don't like the space very much, for we lean into the gifts and cheer of Christmas day far more than the space through Advent that we must take to get there. Because to sit in that space, I think is to do just that. To sit there. And see what emerges. Something we have become famously not good at. Just being. Just sitting.

Our scripture for this morning is John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ in the wilderness. It's many things; a familiar passage, a weird passage, an uncomfortable passage, a hopeful passage, but ultimately, it's an important passage, especially in Advent.

Out of the 4 gospels, only two have stories of Jesus' birth, but all 4 have the story of John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ in the wilderness.

You can't have Advent, you can't welcome Christ's coming – without looking to John the Baptist to prepare the way.

Like this passage, John the Baptist was many things. He was a guy who ate locusts and honey and wore camel's hair and lived in the woods. But also, a guy who was a captivating and a daring religious leader in his own right, drawing followers out from the city into the wilderness.

And to understand John and his ministry you must pay attention to the physical spaces John inhabits, and doesn't inhabit. We're told that John lives in the wilderness. The wilderness is an important space in the history of Israel.

It echoes back to the Exodus, when God delivers God's people from slavery in Egypt and then leads them into and through the wilderness for 40 years on the road to the Promised Land. Those 40 years in the wilderness were important years.

It was a time of testing and trying and learning. The Israelites were trying to figure out how to be God's people. They sinned and rebelled against God in the wilderness, yet also learned to trust and obey God there.

The wilderness gave them a space to do all this, and to do it while relying solely on God to provide.

It's in this wilderness that John the Baptist resides. The space he chooses to inhabit – a space perpetually on the margins. A space to test and to try, to rely solely on God.

Now the space he chooses not to inhabit is the city, Jerusalem.

In ancient world, power was concentrated in central cities. The grand architecture and temples bore witness to the power and glory of the nation or empire or regime in control of the city.

In the physical center of the city would have been important offices where people would pay tribute or taxes. So people were always called to the center, going into the center of power and dominance to pay their dues, to function in their society, and to do this people had to come from the outside, in.

But John flips this intentional societal norm. The people on the margins do not come to him. He is a prophet on the margins, thus people from the city, the city center, the center of power, come all the way out in the wilderness to him – the space reliant on God.

John was so captivating, daring, and dangerous that religious leaders from the powerful city center leave the space that John refuses to inhabit, to enter the space their wealth and power hides them from.

And in this space that John chooses, in the wilderness that people have flocked to, John preaches repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has drawn near." To prepare for Christ's coming, John says we must repent.

Repentance is a loaded term.

The different ways to interpret and define repentance has led to whole denominations and sects of Christianity being formed. And hate between them. It's a word that's always hard to approach with full confidence.

Repentance in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word metanoia. Metanoia translates literally to "Change your whole self." It has the connotation of 'changing one's mind' and 'turning around.'

It was also not a term unique to John the Baptist or Christ. As Ana Case-Winters describes, "it was the standard Jewish prophetic call to reconciliation with God, 'turn' or 'return.'

In this call to repentance, John the Baptist is calling people to turn, or return to God. We have wandered and gone astray, and John calls us to turn back to God because God beckons us home. In this way, repentance is less about what we have "done wrong" and more about the liberating God we turn to.

But to turn to God requires action. To turn is a verb. To turn as repentance means change... changing our mind, changing one's whole self.

To turn or return to God marks a break in the way things are. We cannot turn to God and go about our lives as they were.

I think making that break, that turn, that line in the sand is easy enough. It's walking on the new path and turning that is so much harder.

John calls people out into the wilderness to make that turn. God liberated the Israelites from slavery and so they turn to follow God. And again, it's in the wilderness where they work out how to walk the path after.

For us all, too, the wilderness can be a space where we learn to walk after turning.

Wilderness comes after liberation. We enter the wilderness after we have already been saved, But before we are where God wants us to be, a space in between, a space that is Advent.

It's in the simplicity of the wilderness, where we can hear God most clearly, it's in the scarcity of the wilderness, where we learn to rely on God solely. And it's in the rebellion of the wilderness that we learn resilience and strength reside within us.

Resilience and strength to begin walking on the new path. John the Baptist is harsh in his language of repentance. A brood of vipers, trees cut down, chaff burned in the fire.

It's because repentance must bear fruit. Repentance must bring change. It is not enough to confess sins, to acknowledge what we have done wrong, the oppressive systems we have remained complicit in – the God of liberation calls for a change that dig deeps into the very core of who we are.

But this is good news.

John describes the process a farmer takes to make wheat – keep the good that produces the wheat, leaving the rest behind, and the result is that which sustains life, that feeds our growth.

In this way, I think repentance is not who is the wheat and who is the chaff burned in the fire. Rather repentance is looking at ourselves and seeing what is the wheat and what is the chaff within us. What inhibits who we are - who God calls us to be – we can let that go.

It is hard work to do so. To look vulnerably and honestly at all that we are – the good and the bad, and to have courage to let go of those parts that probably make us comfortable, but ultimately inhibit us from walking that path, from making that turn, to living a life that produces life.

Last week, Advent focused on hope. And we acknowledged that hope is hard, it's ridiculous – but it's hope is the heartbeat that sustains us. This hope that God can take the present, all that we are – and transform it to the space where heaven and earth can enter.

Today, Advent focuses on peace. Peace is not simply the absence of war. The road to peace is hard. For true peace cannot emerge without justice for those whom the absence of peace has led to a life of unjust oppression.

The repentance John the Baptist calls for in preparation for Christ – and the peaceable kingdom he brings – is a call to justice. For justice is more than simply acknowledging what we have done wrong and asking for forgiveness.

Justice demands a break in the way things are, and a **turn** towards a new future where all can flourish in prosperity and dignity.

That is the turn we all must take.

It's been a hard year. From the war in Ukraine, to the overturning of Roe v Wade, to shooting after shooting after shooting.

And it's been a hard year, following a hard year, following a hard year.

And so, Advent as space has given me a lot of comfort. For advent is a wilderness space where we enter and pause – leave the city of these oppressive years, knowing we have already been liberated, but knowing we are not yet who God calls us to be.

And it's in this space where we rely solely on God, where we can try and fail and rebel and trust and ultimately grow. In this space we do that all so that when we leave that space we have all that we need to not turn to the ways of the world that got us to where we are – but to turn to a liberating God in whom we have hope that God can take it all and bring a true and lasting peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.