

Into the Wilderness
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
December 5, 2021
Matthew 3:1–12

Our scripture this morning comes from the 3rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel. We'll be meeting John the baptizer by the river Jordan.

It is common to read about John in Advent, and his message of preparation for the coming kingdom of Christ.

John encourages us to prepare for nothing less than the upturning of life as we know it, personal, cultural, and political.

To prepare is to turn away from the attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and prejudices that blind us to the truth of the belovedness of the world, and its possibilities for good. To turn away from those things that keep us from God, in order to have the capacity to truly welcome Emmanuel, God with us, who shows us what it means to love self, God, and neighbor.

John's message is as relevant today as it was in ancient times, as we face grim news of another school shooting, violence in our cities, new variants in the corona virus, families and friendships divided by political and ideological differences. It is relevant as we watch courtrooms in Washington, our state, and our own city, praying that juries and judges will make thoughtful and compassionate decisions about women's lives, Black lives and voting rights, which effect ALL our lives.

It is into this world, messy and weary as it is, that Jesus enters, once again, the prince of peace, showing us a different way.

Listen to how God may be speaking to you through the scripture this morning:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

³This 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.”’ ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ 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? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do 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. ¹⁰Even 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.

¹¹‘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. ¹²His 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.’

AMEN

In Advent, the church thinks anew about what it means to join God in the movement toward a world that is more like the realm of heaven. A world that is just and loving, peace-filled, where the planet is nurtured and all humans and creatures flourish. John preaches a message of

repentance to prepare the way, the exact message Jesus preaches at the start of his ministry.

John points to Jesus and Jesus points to God. John isn't out there preaching for his own sake. Jesus, John knows, is God's agent that will bring about nothing short of the upside-down transformation of the world.

John preaches outside the center of political and religious power of the day. He is in the wilderness, away from Jerusalem, where the temples and imperial buildings witness to the power of the current regime. Business, with its influence, status and economic power, was done in the city, so people in the country, those who could least afford to, had to travel into the city in order to uphold religious obligations or pay taxes. The desolate location of John and his fiery preaching is an indication that the power of Jesus and his coming reign is not business as usual, nor is it aligned with the cultural, political and religious powers of the day. People from the city and country alike are hungry for this message.

We know that the wilderness plays a significant role in the history of Israel. John the Baptist is modeled after OT prophets who speak a word from God. His clothing and food are that of the poor.

God's people were led out of bondage in Egypt into the wilderness where they wandered for 40 years. They sinned and rebelled against God in their wanderings, yet also learned to listen, trust and obey God there. We know, too, that Jesus, just after his baptism heads into the wilderness prior to beginning his profound ministry.

The wilderness is a place of deep importance. It is a place of deeply felt humanity.

It certainly feels like we are wandering in the wilderness these days. The entire world grieves mounting losses. Covid has taken the lives of 5.23

million people worldwide, 777K in our country and 9, 616 in our state. (https://www.google.com/search?q=covid+19+statistics&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS981US981&oq=covid+19+statistics&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i131i433i512j0i512l8.6339j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) And that doesn't even figure in the deaths and health concerns of others dear to us. Medical personnel are overwhelmed and tired, citizens have lost jobs and homes, and we've all lost what we once knew as normal. Inflation is rising. People are anxious, fearful and angry and are taking it out on others. Political leaders speak with cruelty. And our future continues to be unclear.

We long for the peace that passes understanding.

At Oak Grove, the Holy Spirit is leading us to experience God in new ways, as we walk together, creating space for new rituals, and finding different means of being community. (Consider Alternative Market, Zoom meeting, cookies and carols, "Love is Still the Answer" booklet) We are learning the transformative power of presence as we listen to stories of members and those outside our community.

Individually and as a church we are awakening our history as a majority white denomination and owning the responsibility to re-assess the ways we have been complicit in the powers and structures that have kept people in poverty and promoted racism in our land.

Wilderness wandering is not uncommon in our lives. Illness, job loss, even great things like beginning a new job, a move or new school can locate us outside our comfort zone. The wilderness is a place of liminality, where things are not as they were, nor are they as they will be one day; it isn't permanent

In this Advent wilderness, as we wait and watch for the coming Christ, the prophet speaks a word of challenge, prepare the way, make the path straight.

The word John uses is “repent”. At its root, to repent means to turn, to move in a new direction.

Rev. Ronald Allen says, “To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one’s life colludes with the assumption and behaviors of the old age, to turn away from such complicity, and to turn toward God and the attitude and actions of the realm of heaven.”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-4>)

Matthew also shows Jesus beginning his preaching ministry with the same admonition, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near.” (Matthew 4: 17)

I find this profoundly hopeful because it assures us that while God’s love is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, people can change. We can learn and grow. And if people can change, our relationships can change, systems can change, the world can change. God’s love is a change agent.

Owning up to the thoughts and actions that keep us from enacting God’s love, peace, justice, and freedom, both individually and collectively, repenting, is not about shame and guilt. While those are human reactions to the awareness of wrongdoing, we cannot linger there. We repent in light of our belovedness, and we believe in the belovedness of the other. God’s grace is larger, God’s love is stronger and God’s compassion wider than our ability to sin.

We prepare the way and God makes the way.

Our text reminds us that who we are matters to God, to the world. What we do matters. It is a blessed responsibility.

John the baptizer physically and ritually symbolizes God's new way of being by immersing people in the Jordan river in baptism, signifying turning from sin and opening to God's new way. I sure wish we had a baptism today!

John is a rule-breaker for the sake of love and paves the way for Jesus, the ultimate rule breaker. And it ticks people off.

Matthew tells us that the Pharisees and the Sadducees, those who aligned themselves with the political and religious power of the day, come to John at that river. John is furious! Eugene Peterson interprets the text this way in *The Message*, "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin!"

Repentance is a change of mind and heart that fundamentally alters the way we move through the world. Indeed, it may feel uncomfortable and actually make some folks angry.

In two small groups this week, people named aloud the pain of this wilderness world in which we find ourselves and our need for the coming of the Prince of Peace. O how our hearts hurt. And this is what I know to be true. The God who sent Jesus to this broken world stands within the mess and conflict of this present day. Meets us right where we are loving, forgiving, and accepting us. God accompanies us in the work of transformation and discipleship with all its joys and missteps.

For those whose heart aches, Jesus comes again for you. For those who are lonely, lost, without hope, Jesus comes again for you. For those who

are fighting for justice, caring for the ill, grieving, worn out and weary...
Jesus comes again for you.

I am honored to be among those who have the compassion to bear witness to the world's pain and suffering and humbly seek the way forward as co-creators of God's reign through the work of love. Our ability to see the pain and injustice, name it, bear witness to it, is the first step in transforming it. With tender hearts, we also, then, can bear witness to the beauty and wonder that still exists in this world. This season, in every season, as a Matthew 25 church, may we have the courage to be agents of God's peace in the name of the love that breaks all the rules.

Prepare, prepare, prepare the way of the Lord. AMEN.