

## **Matthew 3:1-12**

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

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

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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 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.

'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. 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.'

## **Glimpses of the Future** - December 8, 2019

*Matthew 3:1-12*

Now we're getting into the good stuff as we move further into the Advent Season. John the Baptizer comes on stage. Advent is the time of preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ. Now to be sure, the events recorded in this passage from Matthew took place when Jesus was about 30 years old and about to begin his earthly ministry. John wasn't doing these things right before Jesus was born.

Nevertheless, John is announcing that the Messiah is coming into the world and the people should get ready for him.

And get ready they apparently did! The scripture reports that John got people excited from all over the region. From Jerusalem and all the surrounding villages, people came to hear John preach and get baptized in the Jordan River.

A note on geography. It is easy to forget when we are hearing these stories, that Israel is a very small place. Israel, in fact, is about the size of New Jersey. Jerusalem is about as far away from the Jordan River as Collingswood is from the Delaware. So imagine that if John were preaching today in our land, he'd be attracting folks from Gloucester, Camden, Pennsauken, Cherry Hill, Oaklyn, and Audubon. Yes, he'd even have folks from Philadelphia coming to see him and hear his message.

See him, most definitely. The Bible seldom describes the physical appearance of people. We, for example, have little idea what Jesus looked like. It's because for the most part Jesus, Mary, Paul, Peter, and all the others we've met in scripture looked and dressed and talked pretty much like everyone else. What I can tell you for sure is that Jesus did not and could not look like the blond, blue-eyed man we so often see in religious art. If you ever travel to Israel or even the Middle East, you'll find that the vast majority of the people are olive haired, brown-eyed, and relatively short in stature. Their skin is not fair, but darker. Men were bearded. Women tended to cover themselves.

So it's a bit unusual for Matthew to describe the appearance of John. John wore a garment made of camel's hair with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. In short, John was different. John physically stood out from the crowd. It makes sense. John's appearance was different. John's message was different. In fact, John's clothing reflected the appearance of the prophet Elijah, who lived long before John and was also regarded as one of the last of the great prophets of Israel. John's appearance, therefore, is intended to get people to remember the days when God sent prophets to Israel who reminded the people to repent, change their ways, and look forward to a new age.

Thus John's coming offered to his listeners a glimpse of the future and that is why people got so excited about his ministry. John preached not just one, but two ways of looking at God and how we should relate to God.

The first way John talks about God is personal. People came to John to be baptized after confessing their sins. What John did for people was to immerse them in the Jordan River as a sign of washing away their past lives so they could start again. Confession and repentance are critical to having a personal relationship with Jesus.

After all, why are we here in church today? Partly to visit friends, partly to honor our families, partly to enjoy the music and even to be in a place which physically looks different from the outside world. But we are here, or at least I hope we are here, to remember and build upon our ongoing relationship with the God who made us, guides us, and loves us more than we can imagine. Our relationship with God is the foundation of our faith. Our relationship with God should drive how we act in life. Our relationship with God should sustain us in both the good and bad times. I hope and I pray that is the main reason why you're here today.

But this relationship with God means nothing, absolutely nothing until we are able to do two things. First, we must repent and confess our sins. Second we must accept and believe that God can and does forgive us. Let's explore these:

Sin. We Christians use that word a lot. We really like to use it on each other. We aren't so keen on using it on ourselves. A song I have grown to really despise is Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky." I'm sure you've heard it many times. The refrain goes, "Going on up to the Spirit in the Sky, that's where I'm gonna go when I die. When I die and they lay be to rest, I'm going to go to the place that's the best." Yuk! In one of the verses he sings, "I'm not a sinner, I never sin, gotta have a friend in Jesus, so that when I die, he's gonna recommend me to the Spirit in the Sky."

Well, folks, that's news. "I'm not a sinner, I never sin." Perhaps you think of yourself as being that way. Perhaps you believe you're not a sinner and you never sin. Well, what is sin? Sin is not just doing bad things. Sin is not just breaking the Ten Commandments. There are certainly many here who can honestly say that they honor their parents, they keep the Sabbath, they haven't stolen anything, killed anybody, or cheated on their partner. Hey, that's good, the church is all for that.

But that's not only what sin is about. Sin is anything: any thought, any word, any action, that breaks our relationship with God. When Jimmy Carter was running for President in 1976, everyone laughed at him when he told Playboy magazine that he was a sinner because he had looked at women and "lusted in his heart." People laughed then. They certainly laugh today. But Carter was right. Thoughts of lust, thoughts of hatred, thoughts of revenge — all these get in the way of having a full relationship with our God of love and therefore they are as sinful as actually cheating on your partner or killing your neighbor, or undermining your boss. And because we have these thoughts far more frequently than we act on them, our very minds are separated from God and our relationship with God is broken.

Every week, we begin our worship by confessing our sins. We lay it out in the open in the company of others because we have to remind ourselves of all the times and all the ways we have broken our relationship with God. If we don't right up front admit that our relationship with God is damaged and needs to be restored, what is the point of being here? I mean, if you're healthy, you don't go the doctor. If your pantry is full, you don't visit the supermarket. If you are not a sinner, then why should you bother with Jesus and going to church?

But the point John the Baptizer was making, and the point we try to make in worship, is that we are sinners, our relationship with God is not what it should be, and we need to confess that truth to ourselves, to each other, and to our God. That is why confession is so critical to our faith journey.

But the other part is equally important and that's the Good News part. When we truthfully confess our sins, when we express our desire to repent and change our ways, all is well and good. God does forgive us. We can start again. Yet many, perhaps most of us stay put in our sins because of our persistent belief that we can never escape them. I know that the act of confession can act to unfortunately remind us over and over of what we have done and how "bad" we have been. There are some churches that actually have done away with confession because it's such a "downer."

But in our worship, the act of confession is followed immediately by the Words of Forgiveness. The two go hand in hand. The two are indispensable. Confession and repentance, followed by forgiveness and restoration. The problem for many of us is that we can neither forgive nor believe that we are forgiven. For many of us forgiveness is an empty declaration, just words. Inside, deep inside, we sinners who confess our sin but cannot accept the reality of forgiveness are trapped in a hell of self hatred and self punishment. It is only when we believe the words, "We are forgiven," that we can truly resume our relationship with God and start over. That is why John the Baptizer proclaimed the need for sinners to repent: so through baptism they could be forgiven and resume their relationship with God.

But there is a second part to John's ministry. John was not just about confession and forgiveness. John was about action.

It is well and good to celebrate the baby Jesus coming into the world. It is well and good to remember his life and the many loving things he did and the many people that he healed. But all that is meaningless unless we also remember that following Jesus means taking our forgiveness and putting it to work in the world.

Friends, true repentance, full repentance, restorative and healing repentance consists of first believing the good news that we are forgiven, but then taking our newly forgiven selves and showing we believe we are forgiven by putting God's love into practice in the world. God loves us so much that

God forgives us even though we sin over and over but then repent. Having received the love of God, what else can we do with it except pour out that love on the world around us!

John attacked the Pharisees and Sadducees, the leaders of the religious establishment. He called them a “brood of vipers.” Not coincidentally, Jesus used the very same words to describe them in his ministry. The religion of John’s day taught that your relationship with God was based on following a set of rules and rituals. In other words, people were taught that if they followed certain laws and performed special rituals, God would take care of them in this life.

But the future John pointed to, the future that Jesus proclaimed is far more wonderful and far more complex than a mere quid pro quo arrangement with God. The future of the world, the future Jesus proclaimed, the future we hope and pray for is not based on rules and regulations, but on reflecting the love of God and the light of Christ into and onto the world around us.

Think about it. Feel about it. Pray about it. Love is our vocation as followers of Christ. Does God have to forgive us sinners when we confess? No. God does not have to do anything. But God chooses to forgive us again and again and again and again solely because God loves us more than we can possibly imagine and by the act of forgiving us again and again and again and again it will slowly sink into to us that because God loves us so much, we can and should love the world in return.

Remember the song, “What the World Needs Now is Love, Sweet Love?” It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of. John the Baptizer came into the world to point the way to a future of love rooted in the forgiveness that God offers every one of us sinners. It is a completely upside down way of looking at the world. It is a completely upside down way of looking at our own lives. It is a completely upside down way of sorting out our priorities and deciding how we should think, speak, and act in this world.

But, if the human race is to survive, if it is to grow, if it is to reach the wonderful potential that God gave to us, love is the only way and the only choice we have.

Look around. How much longer can the world tolerate the hatred, violence, greed, lying, and cruelty we bring upon ourselves? How much longer can the world last if we let the few plunder the resources of this earth at the expense of the majority? When will we embrace the fact of God’s love experienced in our forgiveness and turn it to a love that makes us Christ’s living, breathing ambassadors on earth?

Jesus is coming into the world. John the Baptizer is showing us exactly what that means. We can live, walking in the ways of love, or die clinging to hatred of the past. Today we see a glimpse of what God’s plan and God’s future can truly be. Will we believe it?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.