

## Advent II, Year A

4 December 2022

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

This week, I was invited to renew my Oaths and Declarations in a service at the Cathedral. These are promises first made by clergy during ordination and are renewed from time to time. Bishop Townshend, in his homily, noted that in our present-day context, this practise is remarkable: we are people who takes oaths and make declarations. For instance, I believe, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation...”.<sup>1</sup> This may seem to be a usual claim in our context here at St. George’s, but from the perspective of an outsider looking it, my declaration is wholly strange.

The charge in our Gospel lesson this morning is a simple one: repent. Though this invitation is ours to accept, it does require some unpacking, because in a sense, we are the outsiders looking in. The scene that Matthew captures is strange to us. He writes of John the Baptist out in the wilderness. This is a man, around age 30, dressed in clothes made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. He proclaims: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”. I’m not sure about you, but often when I hear this passage my mind conjures up images of street preachers perched on soapboxes, trying to connect with passersby who avoid making eye contact with the preacher, lest they be singled out. It is the kind of situation that we seek to avoid.

But Matthew writes that the result of John’s proclamation is not that people avoid him. Instead, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea respond by going out to him, where they repent and are baptized. Why is this their response? The Jewish people of Jerusalem and Judea had a worldview that contextualized John’s ministry in a different way than we do. This is because Matthew wrote his gospel account for an audience of first-century Jews. Many of those who had come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah wondered how this truth may be reconciled with their Jewish heritage. This passage would have shown them how Old Testament prophecy was perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

Here's how:

First of all, Matthew underscores that the prophet Isaiah has foretold John’s ministry. He writes,

**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.’”**

This is a reference to Isaiah 40, a chapter where God speaks comfort to his people, for Jerusalem’s penalty is paid; she has served her term.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah speaks of the coming deliverance of God’s people from their Babylonian captivity. The road back to the promised land,

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Common Prayer Canada, *Articles of Religion*, Article VI, p. 700.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:1-2 NRSV.

geographically speaking, is a path through the wilderness. John the Baptist recalls this prophecy from his location in the wilderness, which was meant to help people realize the spiritual wilderness that they were living in. The good news is that the 'way of the Lord' creates a way out from this deserted place.

Secondly, John's clothing of camel's hair and a leather belt link him to the classical prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. He is dressed like Elijah, who is described as, "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist."<sup>3</sup> Matthew intentionally recalls the Old Testament prophet because the reappearance of Elijah was a sign that a messianic age was near. This age was to be a time when God would set all things right, restore the fortunes of Israel, and install a king of kings on David's throne.

How does this understanding of Matthew's intent change the way that we hear the words, "repent," this morning? In other words, how is this good news? Repentance is not a judgement of our choices and actions. Furthermore, it is not a plea for us to try harder; to will ourselves into worthiness. Repentance is good news because it invites us to shift our worldview; to reorient ourselves away from the things that rule us towards God. It is a turning away from our idols, and a turn back to our Lord. Repentance is relational.

Imagine that each of us was locked in a prison cell. One day, we are liberated, our cells unlocked, and we are set free. But we don't act as though we are free; we stay in our confinement, all because we will not turn back to see that our liberator has opened freedom to us. John the Baptist's cry for us to turn back to God is so that we don't miss out on our freedom found in Him. God has opened a path to set us free, but because we also have free will, we must choose to turn back in order to set ourselves on this path.

John's invitation to turn away from our idols and back towards God is a powerful one; it undercuts all that we have been enslaved to. This is so great a message that the powers of Jesus' day; the Pharisees and the Sadducees, are united against it. John calls them out for relying on their heritage, rather than on repentance, as their salvation. He implores them to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

What happens to the tree that does not bear fruit? John warns the authorities of this, "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees,". But the Pharisees and Sadducees believe it impossible that they should be cut off on account of their ancestry. Surely God would not cut off the Davidic line, as the promised king of kings is to come from that genealogy, right?

It is important for us to remember that God is never bound by the conditions that we put upon him. He can fulfill his promises in ways that are unexpected and surprising; miraculous, even. Isaiah speaks of a shoot that comes from the stump of Jesse, as though the family tree is cut off; and yet, a branch comes out of its roots.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 1:8.

This reminds me of a forsythia at my house. It is planted next to our front door, and because it grows so large so quickly, we have given up pruning it and cut it right back to the stump, more than once. God has redeemed this creature for me (irritating as I find it) because the forsythia illustrates how God can bring forth life from something that looks quite dead to me. Every time we think that the plant is finished, shoots grow out of the stumps and new branches extend out from the roots. In a similarly miraculous way, God is able to bring forth life from the stump of branches that did not bear fruit.

If the result of turning away from God is fruitlessness, then the result of turning towards God is bearing good fruit. What is the good fruit borne by those who repent?

The wolf shall live with the lamb;  
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid;  
 the calf and the lion will feed together,  
 and a little child shall lead them.

<sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze;  
 their young shall lie down together;  
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

<sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.<sup>4</sup>

This is the reversal of enmity that started all the way back in Genesis 3, after the fall of Adam and Eve. It is the perfect peace of God's kingdom come. Turn back to Him, so that you can see it in full. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 11:6-8 NRSV.