

Called to Prepare the Way

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 the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and 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? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ 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; 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. 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.”

Theme Statement

Recognizing the reality of sin and the necessity of repentance, we can identify with John the Baptist in his call to prepare the way for Christ. We repent of our sins and bear witness to this repentance through our deeds.

Exploring the Word

All one needs to do is open the news on their internet browser to see that sin is real and very active in our time. Too many stories tell the outcome of our tendency to turn in on ourselves and our inability to put the needs of others ahead of our own. These stories are neither original nor new. And the need for a fresh start is older than recorded history. In the account of the first humans it doesn’t take long before they’ve failed to trust God and have taken matters into their own hands. And they were in need of a fresh start.

The narrative of John the Baptist is a testament to the ongoing need for a fresh start and a turning away from the things that separate us from God, from others, and from ourselves. We are reminded that God is always ready and eager to forgive and to lead us in healthy, wholesome lives.

Matthew 3:1-3 Where? In the wilderness

Perhaps John the Baptist sets up shop in the wilderness for a good reason. The things that provide people with distraction from their self-serving pursuits are absent. When they went into the wilderness, they left behind work that provided resources, relationships that were generally predictable, accomplishments that defined status. Wilderness

stripped them of security. In the wilderness, the only place life is found is where there is water. And through the scarce water, John would take them to the next step in preparation for a changed life that they wanted but didn't know how to experience.

Matthew 3:4-6 Who? Those drawn to the word

John the Baptist was certainly a memorable character. From diet to wardrobe, he was not at all like the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Those who came to hear him were looking for the Messiah to come and set the world right—to bring justice for those who were living under the control of a privileged few.

Those who came to be baptized by him were drawn to a word of forgiveness that didn't require participation in the sin management system of the temple, which was under the power of the priests and religious leaders. Forgiveness for John and his disciples was relational, not transactional. That is, forgiveness was a reboot of one's relationship with God and with others. It was not a payment for what had happened in the past. To repent is to honestly look at the ways one's life goes along with the assumptions and behaviors of the past, to turn away from them, and to turn toward God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven.

Matthew 3:7-10 What? Confronting the establishment

John spoke strongly to the religious leaders who had come out from Jerusalem. They made a living from the religious establishment. They controlled the activities at the temple, where the average person had to go to make sacrifices for their sins. John's call for repentance meant an end to their monopoly. Were these leaders there out of curiosity, out of their own religious longing for a fresh start with God, or to see what needed to be done to silence his message? John

spoke clearly of their need for repentance and of the new day—a new order and new life—that would come with Jesus.

Matthew 3:11-12 Why? More to come

John's baptism was only the beginning. He was a preparer, a pointer, an encourager. He told those who met him in the wilderness that something even greater was on the way. John was focused on the future. The difference between John and Jesus was timing. Jesus taught that the realm of heaven was not simply coming but was here right now. Those who were baptized by the Holy Spirit would experience that reality both in time and in eternity.

The Word Today

People awaiting a messiah live in the wilderness too. The wilderness is a place where niceties are not found. Essentials, however, are. The comforts of a soft life are stripped away and those things that matter, that lead to and preserve life, come into focus.

Our world has experienced wilderness this past year. With the extreme changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, people have had to grapple with losses of loved ones, jobs, and financial stability; closure of schools, restaurants, and entertainment venues; shortages of toilet paper and other staples; and inconveniences like gray roots and overly long hair. Maybe by the time you are reading this, life has returned to something like it was in February 2020. Or maybe we are still in the wilderness.

Even when people are not in the wilderness, in liminal times when change is vast and fast, John the Baptist's call to repent is appropriate. *Repent* simply means to change

direction, make a U-turn. We have made it harder when we require genuine sorrow for our sins and a commitment to never do them again. Come on, people. We're people!

Maybe a healthier approach to repentance is to admit that what we're doing isn't working, and that we're going to try something else. Hopefully, it will be something that builds healthy community, strong relationships, and care for others. Chances are it won't be perfect and we'll have to repent again. But didn't Paul say something like that in 2 Corinthians 3:18? "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." This puts more focus on what God is doing in us, with us, and through us than on the self-focused version of repentance. It makes the wilderness experience one where we encounter a God of love and hope.

When we are able to gather for worship, we frequently start with the acknowledgment of our sin, our failures. We also hear words of forgiveness and are invited to live in God's grace.

In times when we can't gather, we can offer one another this important practice of admitting that what we are doing isn't working and encouraging a focus on trying something different. We all need regular "fresh starts" to move forward in God's grace.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What feelings come to mind when you hear the word *repent*?
2. As a group, create your own definition of *repentance*.

3. How does this repentance prepare you for a new way of living?

Exploring the Word

1. What other wilderness stories do you remember from scripture?
2. How do you think John's physical appearance helped or hindered his message?
3. The religious leaders who came to the wilderness heard a harsh message from John. How do you think the message would be different if John had spoken it at the temple in Jerusalem?
4. Compare and contrast the probable responses of the general crowd and the religious leaders to John's words about the one who was coming after him.

Response of the crowd
of John's followers

Religious leaders' response

The Word Today

1. What things move you and others to the "wilderness"?
2. What daily practices can help us acknowledge that what we're doing isn't working and commit to trying something different?

Closing Prayer

God of all mercy and consolation, come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may confess our sin, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 95)

Further Study

Proverbs 28:13; another view of repentance

Daily Readings

M. Isaiah 40:1-5

F. Matthew 17:9-13;

T. Matthew 11:2-15

Malachi 4:4-5

W. John 1:19-34

S. Matthew 3:13-17

T. Matthew 17:1-8

S. Matthew 3:1-12

Memorization

Matthew 3:3

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.