

Sunday, December 7, 2025
Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)
Matthew 3.1-12
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Winnowing”

Today we are introduced to John the Baptist—the poster child for Advent. Generally viewed as one, if not the, key image of the Advent season, namely because of his message to “prepare the way of the Lord,” which is, after all, what Advent is all about. Preparing the way of the Lord, preparing for Christ’s coming, be it at his birth in Bethlehem on Christmas or at the end of the ages with his Second Coming. John’s message applies equally to both.

Before we get to John’s central message, a bit about John himself. He is, as my mother would say, “a bit of an odd duck.” In more ways than one. We are told that he “wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” We also know that he hung out in the wilderness of Judea, in the region of the River Jordan. This paints an image of him, as is often depicted in artwork, as a sort of eccentric, scraggily, wild man living alone in the desert issuing his prophetic messages. To our modern-day sensibilities, it would be easy to dismiss someone like this as being just not quite right somehow. Raising the question: prophetic or delusional, if not downright crazy? The type that most of us would go out of our way to avoid. And yet, it is this same image of John that would have been very compelling to the people of first century Judea. The description of John—his physical appearance, his demeanor, his choice of habitation—would have all come together to create a completely different image of who John was. To the point that they sought him out.

To first century Jews, the description of John would have been a strong reminder of another prophet who had lived nine centuries before: Elijah. One of the greatest prophets in the history of the Jewish people. One who bore a striking resemblance to John: described in Second Kings as “a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist” (2 Kings 1.8). The description of “a hairy man” referring to him wearing clothing of animal hair, likely goat, sheep, or camel. Not only did the physical description and clothing choices match, but the location of their ministries were also remarkably similar, with Elijah also spending much of his time in the desert wilderness.

Even their messages were aligned. John’s message of “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” is remarkably similar to Elijah’s core message. Elijah had been called by God to preach a message of repentance to the Kingdom of Israel, whose leaders had turned away from the worship of God to worshipping Baal and other local pagan gods.

The description of John strongly resembling Elijah, in appearance, locale, and message, is no accident. It is meant to send a signal to the people of first century Judea that John is indeed a prophet like Elijah of old. Some would have even thought John to be the return of Elijah. As you may recall, Elijah never actually died, but was taken up into heaven by God. And according to another prophet, Malachi, God “will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Mal 4.5). That Elijah would return before the end of the ages and God’s final judgment. Given John’s message, he certainly seems to check all the boxes.

Although, in recounting the story of John the Baptist, Matthew does not leave anything to chance. Regardless of one's perception as to whether John is Elijah returned, John's role as a prophet is explicit. Matthew clearly states, "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Not only referring to John as a prophet, but also providing a deeper understanding of his purpose, of the purpose of his message. The quote from Isaiah is a reference to Isaiah Chapter 40, referring to God's saving actions, not once but twice. An allusion to the Exodus in which God led his people out of Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. And the promise to return Israel to their homeland from their exile in Babylon, which would be a new exodus. In both images, calling to mind the freedom and new life that God promises for his people. Adding a layer to the message of the need to prepare the way of the Lord. Indicating that the Lord who is to come would likewise bring liberation and freedom.

With this background, we start to see why John and his message were so compelling to the people. Why people were flocking to him in the wilderness, including Pharisees and Sadducees from the Temple in Jerusalem. Not an easy trek, to be sure. The Jordan River is between 15 and 18 miles from Jerusalem through some very rugged and treacherous terrain. Terrain that, because of its nature, was also a favorite haunt of robbers—think the parable of the Good Samaritan. So this would have been a dangerous trip just to see some wild man who might be the return of a long-awaited prophet and the ushering in of the beginning of the end.

Although, what was probably most compelling to first century Jews—and certainly what is most compelling to twenty-first century Christians—is that John's prophecy is about the coming of the Messiah. Even at the time of John, the long-awaited Messiah who had been foretold six centuries before: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path's straight." All the pieces seemed to be falling into place: the messenger and the message aligning in ways that had not occurred for centuries. But now, John takes that prophecy to the next level.

The coming of the Messiah is not just at some long-anticipated time, we know not when. Rather, the Messiah's coming is imminent. To the point that John, at least, has clearer insight into what the coming Messiah will accomplish. Images that were completely new, unlike any contained in the ancient prophecies. "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."

As with all prophets, John's words included a call to action. In true sacramental fashion, John incorporates an outward, physical sign to his message, of his call to action. Baptism. Which was interesting. Not for us and our Christian understanding of baptism. But it would have been rather odd for those Jews coming to John in first century Judea. While the Jewish tradition did have a rite of baptism, it was typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism; a sign of their complete conversion. But here, John is calling all comers, including the Jews, to undergo a baptism, a complete conversion, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" In other words, claims of being descended from Abraham, of being Jewish by birth, are not sufficient. All require conversion, not just the Gentiles. Largely because this Messiah was different from the

conventional, historic understanding of Messiah. The Messiah coming will usher in a new era. One in which all are welcomed. One requiring complete devotion, the exercise of true righteousness and faithfulness not just in word, but in action, as well. As John says, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Do what is needed to turn away from our complacency and all that has kept us from truly living as God desires. Preparing for the Messiah’s coming means intentionally turning toward this new life of faith.

John recognizes that baptism, that conversion, is but the first step in the process. As he says of the coming Messiah, “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.” This is often taken as a sign of impending judgement, with the separating of the good from the bad, the righteous from the unrighteous. With the bad, the unrighteous, cast into unquenchable fire, calling to mind the pits of Hell. Consistent with some interpretations of what it means for the Messiah ushering in the day of judgment, the end of the ages.

But, as Jesus is fond of saying, “Fear not!” While John’s warning may be filled with urgency—and rightly so—and his choice of imagery may seem harsh, his vision is one of universal salvation. That the coming Messiah is one unlike anything envisioned in ancient prophecies. We can do our part seeking to repent and to live in ways that are faithful to what the Messiah stands for. But that only takes us so far. We are, after all, flawed human beings. We will invariably fall short. Thankfully, this Messiah for whom we wait will not condemn us for our weaknesses and failings, but rather will carry us the rest of the way to our desired goal.

The analogy of the Messiah with a winnowing fork separating the wheat from the chaff is not about separation and exclusion. Quite the contrary. Grains of wheat and husks are not two separate things but are parts of the whole wheat stalk. Grain and husk start off as a single unit. Every grain of wheat has a husk, an outer covering, that needs to be removed to reveal the usable grain. To this day, farmers use wind, the movement of air, to separate the husks: tossing the wheat in the air with a winnowing fork and allowing the air currents to remove the husks from the grain. The heavier kernels of grain fall to the threshing floor, while the husks—collectively known as chaff—are blown to the side. The usable grain is then collected for use and the remaining chaff is burned as waste. This is an image not of division, but of preservation. Of preserving every grain possible while separating and eliminating that part that is not usable and has no value.

We are stalks of wheat: each comprised of both grain and husk. Like wheat, we all have those parts of us that are good and valuable. And we have those parts of us that ultimately do not serve us well. In the Lord’s winnowing process, what the metaphorical wind and fire remove are those parts of ourselves that get in the way of living as God desires us to. Our anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, greed, and so much more. We are all in need of liberation from whatever chaff is holding us back. We are in need of restoration to right relationship with God that removal of that chaff allows. All made possible by wind and fire. Only, for us, that is the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit: sanctifying, purifying, and restoring us to the fullness of who God has created us to be.

As we prepare the way of the Lord, as we prepare for the coming of our Lord into our midst—both at his birth in a few weeks' time and at the end of the ages—we are called to take a critical look at our lives. Have we been faithful to who our Messiah is and what he represents? Have we sought to live faithful to God's commandments and God's desires for our lives? Have we, in the words of John, borne fruit worthy of repentance? If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we will undoubtedly find a few areas where we have fallen short. But the good news of this season is that the Messiah for whom we prepare and for whom we await, himself awaits our repentance and willingness to submit to the life-saving, redeeming, and liberating work of his winnowing fork.