

Born the King

The Kingdom of Heaven is Near

Matthew 3:1-12

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There was a day during a Christmas season years ago that I stepped out on my front porch, took a deep breath, and involuntarily said out loud to God and any of my neighbors who might've been listening, "This place stinks!"

I was the student pastor at College Church on campus of Northwest Nazarene University. Our boys were little, ages 2, 4, and 6. I'd been serving there for a year, with our youngest, Brenden, being terribly sick. For over a year his health deteriorated as his body refused to digest and absorb food. That was the first of three years that we faced with Brenden like that. During that year Shelly had spent months at the Children's Hospital in Denver, with the world's best experts in treating infants who are "failure to thrive," and they were still all scratching their heads.

I worked for a boss who would not let me take any time off to be with my family, so Shelly struggled all alone for months at a time, three states away with two toddlers and a baby in the hospital. On top of that, I had started my first master's degree, so I was working full-time and was a full-time graduate student. My boss had recently called me into his office to tell me that he was concerned about me – not about my well-being – he was concerned that I wasn't going to do my job well enough because my son was dying in Denver, so I'd better stay busy and not be distracted.

Now I also need to tell you that when I said, "This place stinks," I wasn't just making an editorial comment about my situation in life. To the north of Nampa there was a sugar beet factory. It produced a distinct, non-pleasant odor that filled the city. (It's still there) But it really does stink. You get used to it after a while. It's part of what gives the city its character! But at that time, to the east of the city there was a slaughterhouse, and *that* smelled horrible, too. And then to the south was the city landfill. That smelled horrible too. To the west was the onion fields, so if the wind was picking up, you could smell onions. You could always tell which way the wind was coming from, depending on what it stunk like. And someday, the air swirled around so you got a marvelous tossed salad of horrible smells. On this particular day as I stepped out on my porch, the wind was swirling and it was a terrible combination of stinks.

My life couldn't have been more stressed; I was worn out praying for my son and family and wrung out not being able to be with them, I had little support from my boss, and to top it off the air literally stank to high heaven no matter which way the wind blew. So when I said, "This place stinks!" I meant it literally and figuratively.

Around that same time, I met with a mentor of mine to talk to him about what was going on. I told him that I almost felt like God was punishing me. He said this: “Mike, you are in the wilderness right now. I recognize it because I’ve been in it before, too.” Then he said this, and I’ll never forget it – and this is the point of this story – he said: “We think that wilderness is *punishment*. But if you look in the Bible, wilderness is always *preparation* – if we will trust God and keep following him.” Keep that in mind when you are in the wilderness. And wilderness is a part of the Advent story.

The vast, foreboding wilderness seems an odd place for a new beginning. We don’t always think of vast, foreboding, deserty areas as being a place for new things to begin or grow—yet that is what we are going to see in the Scripture passage for today. Our passage today takes us into the wilderness. Would you stand with me as I read it to us today?

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:1-12, niv)

In the midst of the wilderness, something new is happening. We’ve seen it all throughout the story of Scripture: Moses receiving a call from God in the wilderness; the people of God being delivered from Pharaoh’s hand and continually being provided for in the wilderness; the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness (that story happens after today’s, in Matthew 4). Throughout the breadth of Scripture God’s hand and provision have been present even in the harshest places, the most barren lands.

In church history, we see mothers and fathers who intentionally travel to places of wilderness to deepen their faith with God; mystics who meditate, pray, and write, who call the church to be who we are supposed to be. While most of us spend time *avoiding* wilderness places and spaces in our hearts and lives, it appears that, while they seem barren, these are the very grounds on which God chooses to birth new life.

Here in today's Scripture, we are again in a wilderness. We are not in a synagogue, not in a temple, not in a city—but at the edge of a river in a barren land, as someone with wild hair and crazy clothes cries out, "Something new is happening. Someone is coming. Repent! Be ready! Be ready for this new thing that God is doing!"

So the first thing I want us to see in this wilderness story is that it is...

1. The new *Exodus*

There are a lot of things that God does intentionally with the life of Jesus, and one of those is evident in this passage, which is why it has sometimes been referred to as ushering in the "new exodus" – we're clearly told that this story takes place in the wilderness. We know that the wilderness was a big image in the Old Testament story of the Exodus. If you are not familiar with the Exodus story, maybe you've seen it on TV every year at Easter in that old movie, "The Ten Commandments" with Charlton Heston. If you are not familiar with the movie, that's okay – just look in your Bible: Exodus is the second book in the Bible, and its title is a direct reminder of wilderness. God called Moses while Moses was in the wilderness; God told Moses to go rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. After all kinds of trials and drama, Pharaoh finally let the people go and they went through the wilderness. Maybe you didn't know this, but there is a direction connection between the forty years of wilderness wandering and the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, which you can read about in Matthew chapter four.

Generally speaking, whenever we are travelling through **wilderness**, it is because we are **moving into a new place, away from the old**. Wilderness can be hard, and it can be lonely, but it is never a dead-end, and it is always a part of the transition for us as we move to a new place, away from the old. We don't always like that – sometimes we'd prefer to stay stubbornly in the old places. That's why the Israelites complained in the wilderness – they actually wanted to go back into slavery! Now **we can prolong our wilderness** by being stubborn and not being obedient. The Israelites were going to go through the wilderness, it just wouldn't have taken forty years if they would have obeyed. It would've been a much shorter trip! Nevertheless, they still had to go through wilderness to get to the new things God had in store for them. And mark this: you and I have to go through it in our lives, too. But if you don't want to make it any longer than it has to be, make sure you stay obedient to God.

Did you notice in the passage that John saw the Jewish religious leaders, watching what he was doing? It said:

“But when (John) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (Matthew 3:7, niv)

...and then John really lays into them, warning them severely. What John was really doing was criticizing them for thinking that they had all their theology correct; they thought they had all the answers and they were quite self-righteous about that. The problem was they didn't see that they themselves were the very ones who needed to repent. So John made it clear, giving them a call for change, a change that was needing to happen because the Kingdom of God was coming, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Then remember verse nine; John says to the Jews, “And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” (vs. 9)

John is directly stating that God can make new children if God wants; he is not obligated to the Jews alone; God wants everyone to be in his Kingdom. While the children of Israel were the chosen ones before, God is creating a new people, and this new exodus is to be led by the Messiah.

Remember that in the original Exodus story, the people passed through the Red Sea? The baptism that John is giving people shows a passage through the *new* Red Sea. Through the journey, which baptism represents, they will be formed into the new people of God, following the Messiah. While God used Moses to deliver the Israelites, Moses was also a foreshadowing of what God wanted to do for the whole world, through the Messiah. So not only do we see the new exodus, in John The Baptist we see...

2. The new *Elijah*

The reference to John the Baptist's clothes is to connect him to Elijah, one of the most powerful of the Old Testament prophets. Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8 –

“He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” (2 Kings 1:8, niv)

Remember what our passage said about John the Baptist?

“John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.” (Matthew 3:4)

If that wasn't clear enough, later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus directly refers to John *as* Elijah (**11:10, 14; 17:11–13**). Jesus said, “If you are willing to accept it, (John) is the Elijah who was to come.”

So John is a prophet. Sometimes we think that prophets are like “fortune tellers,” but they’re not; prophets are not fortune tellers, they are “forth tellers” – they are truth tellers. They see the world for what it is and they reveal what is wrong. They might warn you what the future would be like if you don’t repent, and they might tell you what it could be like if you obey God. But their primary job is not to tell the future, it’s to tell you what God wants you to know. John, the new Elijah the prophet, reveals several issues here for the people to confront who were gathered there around him at the water in the wilderness. These warnings are for us, too.

One of the problems was that the Jews had the attitude that what they do doesn’t matter because they are the children of Abraham. They were God’s chosen people and they would always be God’s chosen people, so they could do anything they wanted and they didn’t have to repent of anything. John makes it clear though that God can create children from whatever and whomever he wants. Lineage is not what saves us; it is only God’s grace given to us in Christ that can save us, if we will repent of our sin. John was begging them to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, literally; Jesus was on his way. So repentance was needed on their part.

But they needed to understand, and maybe you do too: repentance doesn’t just mean to seek forgiveness; it means a completely new way of thinking. It means to walk away from our old way of living and old way of thinking and step into the new way, which is the Kingdom of Heaven, not the way of the kingdoms of this world. But the people in those days, and people today, are entangled in the idea that law, theology, and lineage save them. None of those things save us! I don’t care how much you know, how good you behave, or whose kid you are. You are going to need new eyes to see the new way Jesus offers.

Then John tells them that repentance isn’t enough; there must be proof. He tells them they need to “bear the fruit of repentance.” It isn’t enough to give lip service to this baptism and this new way; it must be embodied in the way we live as God’s people.

John says there will be a division of people: those who repent and follow (John calls them the wheat) and those who don’t (John calls them the chaff). You know what “chaff” is, right? Chaff is what’s left when you sift wheat; you remove the good, usable, nutritious stuff – the wheat kernels – and the rest is only fit as fuel for the fire.

John the Baptist is revealing a new way of living as he points toward Jesus, preparing a path for him.

So all of this means for us that there needs to be...

3. The wilderness we *enter*

Part of the reason that we recognize the season of Advent is because it is a time for us to enter our own wilderness places—the places we avoid or don’t want to confront—and

cultivate and look for new growth. This was something that we did last Monday night at the “Comfort and Joy” service. We recognized that for many of us, the Christmas season is filled with wilderness places. But those places provide opportunities as well.

In the passage that we read about John the Baptist in the wilderness, there was a new thing happening. And just like that story, new things are also happening around us and in us, if we are willing to look.

There is a word that we used to talk about the need to realign ourselves with God, and that word is “repentance.” When we hear that word, we often think it is what a person does when they first become a Christian (which it does – a person who is not a Christian needs to confess and repent of their sins). Repentance means that we turn our back on our sin and turn toward God. But by that definition, though, I think you can see that sometimes we Christians need to repent as well; for sure if we’ve committed some kind of sin, we need to confess it and repent of it. But also sometimes we need to repent of having been distracted from our focus on Jesus. The first step is repentance, seeing with new eyes. We need to be willing to enter the wilderness areas of our lives, so that we can see clearly the areas that we need to repent and turn from sin and return our focus to Christ, allowing the wilderness to be a place for a fresh start.

The question we need to ask ourselves is:

**“What areas in our lives need new eyes?
How can we look at them differently?”**

Take a moment and give some thought to that, and write anything down that comes to mind.

Once we see things with new eyes, our lives must begin to bear the fruit of that repentance; there must be evidence in our lives of our repentance. That’s what John the Baptist was talking about in that passage we read.

The next question we need to ask ourselves is:

**What needs to change in our lives?
What kind of people are we being called to be?**

Take a few moments to consider your answers to these questions, and write down what comes to mind.

As Christians here at West Valley Church, we introduce people to Jesus Christ, equip people with a faith that works, and live as people with purpose. We are called to be the children of God. That means we live out the family characteristics of our Father. When we put our faith in Christ, Jesus said that we are born again – born into the family of God. We are his children; we are brothers and sisters of Christ and co-heirs with him. God did not call rocks to be God’s children; God called *us*.

We are part of this new kingdom that Jesus ushered in. So the next questions are:

**What does a citizen of the kingdom of God look like?
How can we live like citizens of that kingdom?**

Take a few more moments and write down your thoughts for that.

We are to live out this new life in Christ in the values we have and the choices that we make. New life comes in unexpected places and is ushered in by unexpected people. The wilderness was a place people feared, and it ended up being a place of preparation for the Messiah. It became a place of new life, new hope, and the beginning of a new people of God being formed.

Our lives might feel like the wilderness right now. I don't know what you might be going through. I know it might be scary and untamed—desolate, even—and you might say, “this place stinks!” But that doesn't mean it is abandoned. There is truth to be told. There is life to be revealed. Even now God is creating new children—not out of rocks but out of us—and new life is being born all around us, if we have eyes to see.

Pray