

Sunday Sermon December 7, 2025

If you're looking for a soft, pillowy entry into the season before Christmas, today's Gospel doesn't provide it.

It's the second Sunday of Advent, which means it's time for John the Baptist. There's nothing gentle or saccharine about him. Dressed in camel's hair and fueled by locusts, the curmudgeonly prophet raises his voice and lets the Sadducees and the Pharisees have it: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Do you ever wonder what he's doing here, invading this nice, sweet, let's-prepare-for-Christmas story? Seriously, though. Today's Gospel, and the baptizing John does in the wilderness, takes place 30 years after the manger scene.

As baffling as it may seem, the holy drama of Advent depends on the disheveled baptizer's opening act. And I say this because even though I've never seen John the Baptist featured on an Advent calendar or on a Christmas greeting card, all four Gospels place him front and center in Jesus's origin story.

So maybe there's something the season wants us to notice in this rough, wild figure before we get anywhere near Bethlehem's quiet glow.

John both appears and cries out in the wilderness. The crowds gather to hear him in a place that is desolate and barren.

Why the wilderness? Why the lonely desert?

You likely know the mantra: "Location, location, location." The place where we stand, the space from which we speak, matters. So let's pay attention to it.

When scripture talks about the wilderness, it is probably not talking about a destination we would choose to be in. The wilderness is often a place we've been taken to against our will by things like illness, loss, trauma, and hardship.

The wilderness is that place we inhabit when our careful plans fail and our lives seem to have fallen apart, and we are powerless to manage or control what is happening.

It could be an addiction. It could be the slow unraveling of something or someone we once trusted. It could be our beloved is dying — or has died.

Perhaps it's when we have lost or cannot find happiness with our job. Or when we find ourselves feeling we are no longer a beloved child of God's family.

The wilderness has many faces.

John the Baptist proclaims his baptism of repentance in the wilderness, away from everything comfortable and familiar. Every year, scripture asks us to inhabit the wilderness parts of ourselves in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

I can tell you that I have spent time in the wilderness. And I imagine that you have as well. The wilderness is a place that lays us bare. It strips away our illusions. It leaves us vulnerable enough to face our true selves. And as painful as that is, it is also strangely holy. Because it's in those places of raw honesty that we begin to sense our need for God more clearly.

In fact, I believe this is how we become prepared for Christ to enter our lives. This is where resurrection begins. When we are in the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and to watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. Because they do.

And so, here we are. In the season of Advent. Walking with each other and being asked to think about the individual wildernesses of our lives.

Our second week of Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with wilderness, repentance, and sin. We can't get to the manger unless we go through John, and John is all about this stuff. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," he cries.

John underscores his message of repentance with a harrowing description of the coming Messiah: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." A winnowing fork. Spirit and fire. Wheat and chaff. Unquenchable flame.

Are you squirming yet? How is this good news?

I wonder if we squirm because we misconstrue the meaning of judgment. We hear judgment and assume condemnation. But judgment, at its heart, is about seeing clearly. In fact, to judge something is to see it clearly — to know it as it truly is. In my dictionary, synonyms for judgment include discernment, acuity, sharpness, and perception.

What if John is saying that the Messiah who is coming really sees us? That he knows us at our very core?

What if the winnowing fork is actually an instrument of deep love, patiently wielded by the One who knows exactly what in us is good grain and what is chaff we don't need to carry anymore?

To repent doesn't mean to simply be sorry. And it doesn't mean to be really REALLY sorry, either. To repent means to begin seeing differently, to begin thinking differently, and therefore to live differently. The original Greek word in Matthew is *metanoia* (met-ah-NOY-ya). *Meta* means "to go beyond," and *noia* is "mind." So it is translated as "go beyond your mind," or "transcend yourself."

To "go beyond your mind" takes you into a way of being and seeing in the world that at first is unimaginable to you, and eventually becomes a source of tremendous comfort and healing. It means inviting uncertainty and the unknown into your life and letting it change you.

When biologist Jane Goodall recounted the effect that her time spent with chimpanzees in Tanzania had on her, she described what I would call a *metanoia* (met-ah-NOY-ya). She wrote:

"All the time I was getting closer to animals and nature, I was, as a result, closer to myself and more and more in tune with the spiritual power that I felt all around.

"For those who have experienced the joy of being alone with nature there is really little need for me to say much more; for those who have not, no words of mine can ever describe the powerful, mystical knowledge of beauty and eternity that come, suddenly and unexpected.

"The beauty was always there, but moments of true awareness were rare. They would come, unannounced; perhaps when I was watching the pale flush preceding dawn; or looking up through the rustling leaves of some giant forest tree into the greens and browns and the black shadows and the occasionally ensnared bright fleck of blue sky; or when I stood, as darkness fell, with one hand on the still-warm trunk of a tree and looked at the sparkling of an early moon on the never still, softly sighing water of Lake Tanganyika (Tang-ga-nee-ka)."

Jane Goodall's reflections on her time in Tanzania reflect a shift in awareness that opened her to beauty, connection, and a powerful call to action. Her story reminds us that repentance isn't about shame; it's about awakening — transformation, discovery, seeing what was always there but newly illuminated.

Could it be that John the Baptist was not yelling with a tone of dread and doom, but with an equally intense voice filled with hope? What if we choose to hear John's call —

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” — not as an ominous threat of impending condemnation, but as an invitation to live into God’s dream? And maybe the wilderness is where we finally become quiet enough and honest enough to hear that hope.

John doesn’t say, “Be like me.” John doesn’t say, “Get a camel leather wardrobe like mine.” He doesn’t say, “Switch your diet for mine.” He doesn’t say, “Grow a beard like mine.”

Our wilderness experiences are not the same. The chaff we carry is not the same. The dream God has for us is not the same. God’s dream for us will not all involve living with gorillas. But what is the same is the invitation — the call to wake up, to see differently, to make space in ourselves for the One who is coming.

Like John, we may not be worthy to carry his sandals. But also like John, we know who he is. And like John, we have a part to play in preparing the way. The wilderness prepares us. Judgment frees us. Repentance transforms us. And all of it — all of it — is meant to open us to God’s dream for us.

What God accomplished in Jesus’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection is not over. God is still at work. And we — in our imperfect, wilderness-wandering, *metanoia*-seeking lives — are part of the continuing story.

Repent, and live into God’s dream. The kingdom of heaven has come near. **Amen.**