

A Time of Repentance

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*It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...everywhere you go*

The lights are up on peoples' houses, you can see Christmas trees in the windows, the Christmas candies are in the stores, we've had our fair!

All the signs are there! It's Christmastime! My favorite!

Of course, we in the church know that it's not Christmas yet – it's Advent, the season leading up to Christmas

But all the signs are there!

We're heading towards Christmas, towards the coming of God incarnate as a baby in a manger

In this morning's gospel reading, the signs are all there for the people of Jerusalem and all of Judea, too

At least that is what our gospel writer, Matthew, is trying to convey to us

Matthew is telling us that all the signs were there for the people of Jerusalem and Judea to pay attention to this man John, who "wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." (vs. 4)

It may be a reference missed by us today unless we're scholars of the Hebrew Bible, but to the people of Matthew's day, they would hear the description of this man, John, and know right away: he looks like Elijah!

Elijah the great prophet who, in Jewish expectation at the time of Jesus, would come again when the reign of God was at hand.<sup>1</sup>

In 2 Kings, Elijah is described as “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.”

See the similarities?

When the people of Jerusalem and Judea heard that a man wearing camel fur and a leather belt around his waist was out in the wilderness baptizing people in the Jordan river, their curiosity would have been piqued, their awareness raised – this is someone to pay attention to!

The signs are there!

And so people flocked to the river to hear and see this odd character

And his message was loud and clear: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” John is the voice calling out in the wilderness “Prepare the way of the Lord”

John the Baptist is so well known and beloved in the Christian story for how he raises our attention and yet embodies a gateway, a sign post along the way that says “you’re almost there, but the one whom you’re seeking is not me but the one who comes after me, are you ready?”

Are you ready? The signs are there, it’s almost time – are you ready?

Are you ready for Christmas?

And I don’t mean are all your presents purchased and your meals planned, your event calendar full and your trees trimmed

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-7>

I mean, are you ready to meet the Lord?

Are you ready to welcome the Lord into your/our reality? Our lives?

John the Baptist has thoughts on what we need to do to be ready – John's take is that we need to bring people out into the wilderness and invite them to repent

Not exactly the decked halls and "fa la la la la" invitation that we might expect based on the signs we see this time of year, huh?

Christmas is coming! Go out into the wilderness and repent!

And yet, does doing what we usually do this time of year – all those other checklists I mentioned – do they really prepare us for meeting the Lord? for welcoming the Lord into our lives?

Of course they prepare us for celebrating a holiday that so many of us cherish, and I don't poo-poo them I do them myself

And, I have been really captured by the remembrance lately that Advent is not just about preparing us for the coming of our God incarnate as a baby in a manger but also the coming of our God into the world every day and the coming of God into our world at the end of days

Am I prepared to welcome God into my life? It honestly isn't always on one of my checklists

Unless! Unless I'm really intentional about it!

Unless there are signs and signals that remind me to do something else and make the space!

Like a big man in camel fur with a belt around his waist inviting me into the wilderness and encouraging me to repent

Stanley Saunders, former faculty member at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, writes that “John...calls [the people] away from the holy city and the temple toward the wilderness, a place of danger and testing, but also the place where Israel was formed, where God’s provision and care was demonstrated, and the people grew ready for God’s promises. In the wilderness, away from the trappings of human traditions and powers, we may see and hear God’s call more clearly.”<sup>2</sup>

The wilderness is not a random space – it’s a really specific space where you can go to be reminded of God’s provision and care, where you can hear God’s call more clearly.

Where is your wilderness? What is your wilderness? And where can you find it in the hustle and bustle of this season?

Perhaps it’s here in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings or the midweek service – that certainly is meant to be a space for that kind of remembering

Perhaps it’s the actual wilderness with hikes in the woods or pausing at the edge of the rivers and ocean that surround us

Perhaps it’s a cozy nook of your home where you can sit with a cup of tea or coffee.

But, it’s not a random space – it’s a really specific space where you are reminded of God’s provision and care, where you can hear God’s call more clearly

Where is your wilderness? How can you take time to remind yourself of God’s provision and care? How can you hear the gentle soft voice of your God?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-6>

John's second recommendation for preparing our hearts to receive the Lord is repentance

So many of us hold onto an image of repentance that includes lots of self-shame and guilt – admitting somehow that we are terrible people

But that's not the full image of repentance in our tradition

Dr. Saunders writes: "John's way of preparing...focuses on repentance, that is, turning from the ways of this world to practices that fit the time of God's coming. Jesus identifies these practices in" other passages in scripture like the Sermon on the Mount, "and more generally in his practices of inclusion and welcoming, which nurture forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness."

I love how Dr. Saunders flips that script on what we usually think of repentance and describes it not as some sort of self-shaming listing of our wrongs but rather a *practice* of actions and ways of being in this world that align with Jesus' practices of inclusion and welcoming, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness

Repentance definitely requires us to recognize that we're not always embodying those practices and that recognition is very important

AND, rather than dwelling in shame, when we repent we recommit to living the practices Jesus has called us to live

"For Christians repentance is not a religious moment or experience in which we 'come to God,' but then continue to live within the social narratives and structures that constitute life as usual," Dr. Saunders writes. "Repentance is a perpetual state of readiness to challenge our commonplaces, the myths we live by, which produce not the fruit of repentance, but the practices of alienation and violence we too easily take for granted."

John the Baptist and the season of Advent invite you to repent – to challenge our commonplaces and recommit to the practices of Jesus, of inclusion and welcoming, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness so that we are ready to welcome the Lord into our lives

Because, the signs are there, my friends! Christmas IS coming! God IS coming!

John the Baptist cries out to you: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near...Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Dwell in your wilderness this Advent to remember God loves you!

Repent, notice, and recommit to the practices of inclusion and love, forgiveness and restoration this season.

Prepare your heart to receive the Lord for that is what’s about to happen! That’s what all the signs point toward.

Amen.