

Second Sunday of Advent: December 4, 2022
The Rev. Nat Johnson

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Last Sunday we began at the end, looking not toward a sleepy manger with an infant, tender and mild, but toward the final coming of Jesus when all things will be brought under the unfolding reign of God. Our beginning at the end is meant as a jolt to wake us from sleep, to snap our attention toward the promise of God's coming again, and to bid us to enter this season of Advent with expectancy, anticipation, and quiet hope. In the scope and arch of our gospel narrative, we move chronologically backward to the origin of Jesus' ministry and it's annunciation by John the Baptist. Again, we're met with images that seem out of place in our preparation for receiving the Christ child. His is a harsh presence to accommodate when we're longing for the angelic choir announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds on a hillside. Instead of promises of peace and goodwill, we hear one crying out: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!"

Just as John seems out of place in this season, so too does the image of "the wilderness." When I think "wilderness," I see images of desolation and vulnerability, of danger and risk. It is a place that conjures up feelings of being alone, of being tested and tempted. But Matthew seems to insist that it is precisely here, in the wilderness, away from the power structures and institutions of Empire and establishment that the word of God comes and promises transformation. Yes, John's message seems harsh, but I suspect that has more to do with our own discomfort around sin and repentance than it does with the invitation that John offers.

In our cultural context, we have developed a distaste for the notion of sin. When I was growing up, I was taught that "sin" meant "missing the mark," falling short of God's expectations of us. As I got a little older, "sin" was framed as "breaking a known law of God." Like many of you, I have seen these kinds of definitions used to create, support, and reinforce group identities that leave no room for difference. I have seen these definitions used to violently condemn those whose faith and belief looks different from their own. Our social understanding of sin is shrouded in shame and guilt, wrapped up in condemnations of impurity and unworthiness. In this context, "repentance" is often imagined as individualistic, dealing with personal and private matters that function more like a distorted self-help regime than an invitation to transformation and new life.

But what if our commitment to individual rights and autonomy have distorted our understanding of sin and repentance? What if our narrow vision of John's admonition to repent leaves us bereft of healing and wholeness, precisely because it is centered in propositional platitudes and doctrinal purity? What if we could imagine sin as that which keeps us from being fully human, from loving God with our whole selves and loving others without pretense, condition, or agenda? What if we could picture sin as that which creates and reinforces barriers of separation between difference while distorting our relationships with God, one another, the earth, and ourselves?

If we could understand "sin" this way, how might that change the way we think about John's call to repentance? Perhaps, instead of seeing repentance as regret, remorse, or sorrow, weighted with shame and guilt, we might see it as an invitation to transformation. We might encounter the exhortation to repent as a means to reorient ourselves, our hearts, our behaviors, our consumption, our

relationships toward the life-giving power of God. Repentance, from this perspective, is less about feeling bad about something wrong we did, and more about *turning away* from those things that bring destruction and harm. And we turn not toward an empty void but toward the healing, wholeness, and restoration that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

I suspect that if we understood repentance this way, it might also be easier to hear John's words about the coming wrath of God and his exhortation to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Again, our social understanding of judgment, especially when it's connected to thoughts about God, tends toward notions of punishment and condemnation. We see images of fiery lakes of sulfur, the four-horseman of the apocalypse, and global destruction. And, to be sure, these are certainly biblical images.

But these images have been used to create caricatures of hell that stop short of the full picture and purpose of judgment throughout Scripture. Judgment is not meant as a punishment but as a way of stripping us of all that keeps us from accepting, embracing, and living into the healing, wholeness, and transformation that God offers us. When the Bible speaks about judgment, it speaks about a God who sees us clearly, who sees us for who and what we are. We are stripped away of our false sense of security and self-sufficiency so that we might see ourselves rightly, as creatures of a loving God, dependent upon the very breath of life that God breathes into our souls and our bodies. God's judgment separates us from all that is destructive so that all that is good, beautiful, and life-giving within us might be exposed. As John tells us, judgment is the separation of the wheat from the chaff.

Advent is a season of wilderness. A season of judgment. In these weeks leading up to Christmas we are bid to enter a journey of self-examination, laying ourselves bare before the judgment of God, repenting of all the ways our lives, our thoughts, our commitments, our habits keep us from being fully who God made us to be. Our journey into the wilderness is meant to expose our false self-images, our false perceptions of the world, our distorted and broken relationships so that in our utter dependence upon God, we might also participate in the task of Preparing the Way of the Lord.

For it is in this wilderness that God's way is paved and the word of God comes to us. Far from being a place of desolation and barrenness, the wilderness is a place of transformation, of impossible possibilities as we turn away from all that keeps us from divine love and relationship. And, it is the place where we meet the Spirit of fire, who purges from us all that causes harm and destruction so that we might learn to live in peace and harmony with all of God's creation.

More than just an exercise in self-reflection and self-help, these are practices that open us to the invitation to follow in John's footsteps, to participate in preparing the way of the Lord. May the God of judgment give us the grace to embrace the transformation of repentance as we journey through the wilderness of this Advent season. Amen.