

Matthew 3:1-12 The Turning

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 3: "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, „Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Wrong Turns in the Wilderness

John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness of Judea, down by the Jordan River. He's a big deal: Matthew wants you to realize this, so he gives you some of John's credentials. He's the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight." That's a chapter of Isaiah that's full of all sorts of good news: it begins with the Lord declaring comfort for His people, that He pardons their iniquity and has covered their sin with grace upon grace. In the words of Isaiah 40, John is there to flatten mountains and fill valleys, to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah—and the saving comfort that He brings.

John's wearing camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. It's not the latest fashion, but the same clothes that the prophet Elijah wore way back when. Don't forget: as we heard a couple of weeks ago in Malachi 4, the Lord promised that He would send an Elijah just before the Messiah, and He was talking about John the Baptist.

All of this is to say that there's big doin's out there in the wilderness. Isaiah, Elijah and Malachi have all pointed to John; and John is there to point to Christ. That explains his sermon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And the kingdom of heaven is at hand because the King is about to appear. That also explains his location—out in the wilderness by the Jordan. It's time for the people of God to repent, to "cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land" all over again.

The people understand that this is big, and it seems like everybody is going out to hear John preach about repentance. They listen to him, and they understand that their sins just won't do. They haven't been living up to God's expectations for His people Israel. So they repent. They confess their sins. They're baptized by John in the Jordan. They're taking his preaching seriously. They understand he's calling for a change, a turning.

Let's think this through as they're thinking it through, because this is critical to follow the story. John has called them to repent, to turn, to confess their sins. It makes sense that, if you're turning away from sin, then you're turning toward not sinning, right? To put it another way, if you're turning away from doing bad things, then it only makes sense that you're turning toward doing good things, right? That would be a 180, a complete turnaround in the opposite direction.

It only makes sense, then, when the Pharisees show up at the Jordan River. The Pharisees are all about doing good things—they're admired by most for the good example they give. They're also all about washing things: they baptize their dishes, cups and couches before every meal so that they're clean. So when the Pharisees show up, you can bet that a lot of people just know what's going to happen next. John will welcome the Pharisees as role models, as good examples: they're not perfect, but they've already made most of the turn. Maybe not 180 degrees, but a good 150 or so: nobody's perfect, after all. They're setting the bar for what Israelites should be acting like. This is also true of the Sadducees who show up: they don't have a lot in common with the Pharisees; but rather than wallow in sin, they're holding to a code of good behavior, setting a good example. So John will welcome them and hold them up as role models; and the Pharisees and Sadducees will be baptized to demonstrate their commitment to making the turnaround.

That's what a lot in the crowd expect. It's almost certainly what the Pharisees and Sadducees expect. But then John drops the bomb. To the role models who have made the turn, John declares, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:7- 10).

Is John mad? He's just slapped the leaders and good examples across the face. He's called them vipers—dangerous and deadly to others. He's told them that they're not good Israelites at all, that their ancestry and careful lives mean nothing to God. He's called them trees that bear bad fruit, about to be cut down and thrown into the fire. What on earth is John up to? And if the Pharisees and Sadducees are that bad off, if they haven't made the turn at all...who then can be saved?

John's outburst against these leaders is earth-shaking. Everybody thought they had John figured out, but now they're dumbstruck, utterly speechless. This is the forerunner of the Messiah, and he's just told the role models that they're under God's wrath? What sort of a forerunner is this to the Messiah, and how can he say such things? I mean, it's almost like he looked at the Pharisees and said, "These tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you." John doesn't go that far; but the Messiah Himself will (Matthew 21:31).

One thing's for sure: when John speaks of this repentance, this turning, he's not talking about turning from "sinning" to "not sinning"—not if he's reserved his ire especially for the Pharisees. Whatever he's talking about is something different, something new.

The "something new" is this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It isn't far away. It's near—not just in time, but in location. The kingdom of heaven is near because the King of heaven is near. He's born of Mary, God-made-man, and He's about to walk up to John to be baptized.

The King is near, and the kingdom is wherever He is.

If the King stays far away along with His kingdom, then it makes sense that you've got to go to Him. If you've got to go to Him, then it makes sense that you get on your way by cleaning up your act, by turning from "sinning" to "not sinning as much as possible." But the King is coming to you, and that changes everything. The turn is not from "sinning" to "not sinning." The turn is from "trusting in you" to "trusting in Him," "from trusting in your works" to "trusting in His" for salvation.

That's what repentance is. Repentance is not saying, "I've sinned and so I'm not going to sin anymore." The one who says that is lying to himself. Repentance is saying, "I've sinned and I can't save myself, so I trust in Christ to forgive me and save me."

That's why the Pharisees, the Sadducees and many in the crowd are so far off and under the wrath of God. Everyone who thinks that repentance is about doing better and sinning less is still unholy and unforgiven. The one who says, "I am sinful and I need the King to save me" is the one who has truly repented, even if he still sins. If you want proof, then fast-forward to Calvary: the Pharisees, counting on their own righteousness, have arranged for the death of Jesus. It's the thief on the cross, with no good works to his name, who says to the thorn-crowned King, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And it's to that thief that Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Repentance is a turning: not from "sinning" to "not sinning," but a turning from trusting in one's own righteousness to trusting in the King to save. That's what John declares in the rest of our text: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier 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 and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12). The King comes to save. He baptizes with the Holy Spirit, who gives faith and salvation. His baptism purifies like fire, leaving those who trust in Him sinless and holy. Trust in yourself, and no matter how good a life you live, you'll be swept into unquenchable fire. Turn from that and trust in Him, and you're in the kingdom of heaven forever.

John's Proclamation Today

We proclaim the same message as John the Baptist, because we have the joyful privilege of pointing to the King who has come, died and risen again for our salvation.

So we proclaim, "Repent!" And when we proclaim repentance, we mean this: "Turn from trusting in your own righteousness to save you, and trust in the King who died on the cross to deliver you from sin."

We do not mean, "Turn from sin and do your best to stop sinning."

That's a controversial statement for a couple of reasons. One reason is that most people who identify themselves as Christians perceive Christianity to be all about doing your best to live a good life and keep the commandments. In other words, so many believe that the message of Christianity is that "if you keep the rules, God will save you." That is salvation according to the Law; and it is a view of that is held by many very nice, very sincere, very pleasant people who are even holding society together. But to those who believe this, John would say, "You brood of vipers! You're dangerous to others because you tell them to rely on their good works, and you're not bearing good fruit before God because you don't trust in Christ and you're not forgiven, so sin clings to everything you are and do."

Be ready: when you speak of salvation in Christ alone, a lot of "Christians" are going to be put off.

It's a controversial statement for another reason: as soon as we say that repentance does not mean, "Turn from sin and do your best to stop sinning," the response will be, "Oh! So you're saying that it's perfectly fine for Christians to keep on sinning as long as they trust in Jesus?" Our answer: Not at all! If someone says, "I can keep on sinning as long as I trust in Christ," he is worse than the Pharisees of our text. Why? Because he's saying, "I trust in my own righteousness so much that I believe I can keep on sinning, be unforgiven, and still be saved!"

To put it another way, true repentance is turning from trusting in your own righteousness to trusting in Jesus; and the one who trusts in Jesus will, by definition, work to keep God's commandments and avoid sin as much as possible. He'll still stumble, fall and sin, daily and much. But he'll continue to repent, confess his sin and trust in Jesus for salvation.

So, like John, we continue to proclaim, "Repent! Turn from trusting in yourself, and trust in Christ for salvation instead." And, like John, we also proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," because it is. The kingdom of heaven is at hand because the King is at hand. Your crucified and risen King is not only enthroned in heaven at the right hand of the Father. He is as near to you as His Word and His Sacraments. In the verse following our Gospel lesson, Jesus stands in the flesh before John the Baptist; and He is just as much present, though unseen, in His means of grace. By His Word, He gives you forgiveness. He gives you faith. He gives you His Holy Spirit. With all of this, He gives you true repentance. Do not neglect that comfort of the King at hand: the more distant you believe Jesus to

be, the more you will believe it is up to you to get to Him by your own works, your own righteousness. But it is not so: Christ your King comes to you, to give you forgiveness, life and salvation.

So repent—for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Rejoice to confess the truth of your sinfulness and inability to save yourself, for that confession is a gift of God: if you deny your sin, you still believe the lie that you can get to heaven unforgiven. So rejoice to repent. And rejoice that the kingdom of heaven is at hand—that by His grace, the Lord has turned you: from impenitence to penitence, from unbelief to faith, from death to life...because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen