

Based on Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"*

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Matthew 3:1-12

In the Scriptures, the Israelites who were freed from bondage in Egypt wandered in the wilderness many years before finally crossing the Jordan river and returning to live in the land promised to them, the land of the patriarchs.

What we should remember about God's promise is that God promised the Israelites a land of milk and honey. Now, the thing about milk and honey is that neither are produced from human labor. Milk and honey are made by the cows, the goats, and the bees but the cows, goats, and bees don't make it for us; they make it for themselves, and we humans take of it what we need. Milk and honey then are the products of creation itself, and by extension, the product of God's own handiwork.

So, God's promise and hope for Israel is that they would be a people who lived contented by the abundance that God provides. But, of course, that's not what happened. The Israelites turned the covenant and the promise into a system to subjugate the many to the selfish will of the few. They dreamed of worldly glory and in the end, their kingdoms were destroyed and many were taken into exile.

At the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Israelites had been returned for many generations, but the supposed leaders had become enamored of Greek and Roman culture and were willing to sell out

the people in order to curry favor with the Roman rulers, enriching themselves and securing their status.

In response to this degradation, John is offering to the people an opportunity to start over, to hit the reset button. John's baptism is an invitation to symbolically join their ancestors in the wilderness and passing through the Jordan, enter anew into the promised land, to enter anew into a life of possibility within God's promises. John is dismissive of the Pharisees and Sadducees here because they are the very ones who have led the people astray, and who would seem least likely to want to hit the reset button on their relationship to God.

And John tells of the coming of Jesus, who like Joshua leading the Israelites across the Jordan will lead God's people into the promised life which will no longer be limited to one particular place or to one particular people but will include the whole earth and anyone willing to live in the covenant to be God's people.