

Sacred People

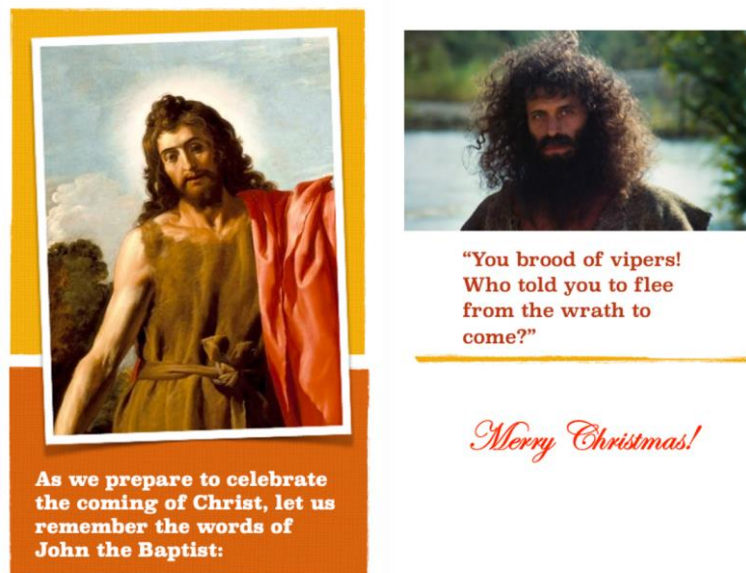
A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 4, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 3:1-12](#)

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Once upon a time, I would send out a Christmas card with a *what happened this year* letter to family and friends. I know I always enjoy getting them, and so I tried to send them, too. As wonderful an idea as it may be in concept, it's probably been close to three decades since I've managed to send one before Christmas, and maybe half as long since I've managed to get a letter and card out by Groundhog's Day.

I thought I'd try again this year and so I started designing my card. I decided to go with a biblical theme. Here's the cover: "As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, let us remember the words of John the Baptist." And here's the inside: "'You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?' Merry Christmas!"



I think that really embraces the essence of the season.

Or perhaps not.

On first glance, John the Baptist's sermon comes across as confrontative, angry, judgmental. However, on closer inspection, I think you'll find it's actually a powerful, door-opening message of inclusion and hope, moving us to love. Let's do a little closer inspection.

Let's start with the image of John that most of us have – something like [this 13th century fresco](#): "a scraggly, isolated eccentric, alone in the wilderness."¹ In some ways, the specific details Matthew offers (his camel's hair clothing and leather belt; his locust and

¹ "Change Your Mind," *SALT*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/12/3/change-your-mind-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-two> (accessed 30 November 2022).

honey diet) make him seem especially eccentric, a wild man out in the wild land. Maybe that view comes from our greater familiarity with the contemporary comforts of home and our lesser familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures. I think Matthew includes these details to help cast John as a new Elijah, and at the same time as the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of a voice crying in the wilderness (which might not have been what Isaiah actually meant) "ushering in a day when God's glory will be revealed, and 'all people shall see it together' ([Mt 3:4](#); [2 Kings 1:8](#); [Mt 17:11-13](#); [Isa 40:3-5](#))."²

Matthew isn't hoping we conjure up an image of a crazy person living out in the wilderness. In fact, the reason John is in the wilderness probably has as much to do with that being where he's safe as anything else. Brandon Wrencher points out that "John is pushed into the wilderness because he is a threat to the status quo."³ John is such a thorn in the side to the status quo that the principalities and powers will, later in the gospel, execute him. Like Elijah before him, John is in the wilderness because out here he is "beyond the coordinates and control of the empire. God is on the move – and the dawn of the new era of redemption, heralded by Elijah's return, has arrived."⁴

And that's what John preaches. "Repent, for God's realm has come near!" This is a radically open invitation – because anyone, because all of us, can repent. "The Greek word for 'repentance' here is *metanoia* (from *meta*, 'change,' and *noia*, 'mind'); today we would say, 'change of heart' or 'change of life,' a thoroughgoing and ongoing shift and reorientation. Accordingly, the visible sign for this change John uses is baptism, an immersive rite then typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism, to signify their comprehensive conversion."⁵

The thing is, John is calling on everybody to make this change, and I think is especially focusing on the children of Abraham. John is saying, "We all require conversion, not just the Gentiles. For a new day, a new era is at hand! Change your minds and hearts and lives! Come and be baptized for the sake of forgiveness of sins – for God is coming near."⁶

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes that John's call for repentance, is a call about "ending old loyalties for the embrace of the new regime."⁷

"Jesus ... came to cause inversion, to displace the old marginalizing arrangement," Brueggemann writes. "He summoned people to abandon the old patterns for God's new truthfulness.

"It does not surprise us that John has conflict with the ones who value the present arrangement [referring to the verse 7 where John confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees]. The establishment figures do not understand that this coming of the new king means the

² *Ibid.*

³ Brandon Wrencher, "Fire of Love," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/fire-love> (accessed 3 December 2022).

⁴ "Change Your Mind," *op. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "The End of the Known World," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/end-known-world> (accessed 3 December 2022).

end of privilege and priority. They trivialize the baptism of Advent as a religious act without realizing that it means the end of the known world.

“And so John disputes with them, urging that their pedigrees of status, conviction, and influence are of no use, because all these belong to the old age now placed in deep jeopardy.”⁸

We noticed in our Monday Morning Bible Study (to which all of you are invited) that the Pharisees and Sadducees had come *to be baptized*. They are not the bad guys in this story, even though John calls them a brood of vipers. They came for the right reasons, but they didn’t know how radical a change was required.

“The lesson ends,” Brueggemann says, “in verse 12 with images of harsh judgment on those who hold too intensely to old power arrangements that do not grant access to the poor and marginal. They do not know it yet, but the worldview of the Pharisees and Sadducees is in fact deeply resistant to the coming of this new ruler.”⁹

While I think the judgment is for those who hold too intensely to old power arrangements, I don’t think the judgment is limited to this group. And I don’t think it’s necessarily all that harsh. Yes, it sounds fairly hellfire and brimstone, but maybe that has more to do with our expectations of John than with what John was saying.¹⁰

“... the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and 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.” John doesn’t say that the one coming after him (that is, Jesus) will separate the good grain from the bad grain. John says that Jesus will separate the wheat from the chaff. “This is a metaphor of preservation and refinement, not division. What the wind and fire remove are the husks that get in the way: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less just, or less respectful [and compassionate] of others.”¹¹

We can hear this as scary news, or we can hear it as liberating news, or maybe as a little of both. In all honesty, I hear it as both liberating and scary because I know who I am with all the chaff, and I don’t know who I will be with all the chaff burned away. And still, I imagine what could be if God burned away from my life everything that makes me less generous, less just, and less loving.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr is fond of saying, “God loves things by becoming them.’ This is an incarnational worldview that makes the physical manifestation of the Christ in the person of Jesus make a lot of sense. The birth of a baby into a divided and dangerous world (yes, this has perhaps always been the condition of the world as it certainly was in the first century) is a big ole clue to us humans that God is in love with

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ It occurred to me after preaching this sermon that maybe the “hellfire and brimstone” edge to what John says may have more to do with John’s assumptions about an image of God than of who God actually is.

¹¹ “Change Your Mind,” *op. cit.*

each and every one of us.”¹² And not only that God loves each and every one of us. It’s a big ole clue that God is coming to show us how to be more fully human, without all the chaff.

If the birth and life of Jesus is about love, if the birth and life of Jesus is about God revealing the sacredness of all time and space, then we (as part of time and space) are sacred people, as is each person we meet along the way. May our eyes and hearts and minds be open to reflecting the sacred in our lives and to see the sacred reflected in each person we encounter. Amen.

¹² Marcia McFee, “Sermon Fodder” resource that is part of the “Reflecting the Sacred” worship series materials available from the Worship Design Studio, <https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/>.