

### **Matthew 3:1-12**

*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.”*

Well, we made it to December. Thanksgiving has come and gone. The Christmas holiday season is in full swing. We had a great parish Christmas party this past Friday. The lights and the decorations are all up in the stores. Houses in our neighborhood are being transformed.

So, how about you all? Are you getting ready? Are you decking the halls, as the song says? Tis the season to be jolly, right? Are you listening to the Christmas music station yet?

The big day is coming just three weeks from today. The joy, the peace, the celebration is coming. And all we have to do, all we must do in order to embrace the Joy, is get through today, the Second Sunday of Advent. We must face John the Baptist. We have to do it every year. We have to come face to face with the person that Isaiah spoke about when he said: “A voice cries out; In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Anyone who has been in the church for more than 12 months remembers those words. We hear them every year early in Advent, typically the second Sunday. We hear something about “the wilderness” and something about getting “prepared” and, as we do, as we listen, we sit in our churches and for a moment nod solemnly with a serious look on our faces...and then we rush out the doors with visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads, thanking God that that Baptist didn’t linger too long. You know we do it, right?

Well, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, before we hang the stockings by the chimney with care, there is a wilderness that must be considered and a preparation that must take place.”

In the Bible, wilderness is typically a place of desolation; a place without life; a place of wandering and confusion and separation. What is interesting, however, in regards to the wilderness in this passage, is that it can be read two ways. In Isaiah it is written like this: A voice cries out...in the wilderness...prepare the way of the Lord. They are three independent phrases that we have to put together in a way that make sense to us. Most of our New Testament references to this passage connect “in the wilderness” to the first part, “a voice cries out”. So it goes like this: “A voice cries out in the wilderness...prepare the way of the Lord.” In the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, however, the “in the wilderness” is traditionally connected to the second part, like this: “A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” Now maybe it doesn’t make a bit of difference. On the other hand, maybe it is something critically important in order to help us with perspective during this season. Maybe “in the wilderness” is less a geographic descriptor about the person speaking somewhere and more a spiritual descriptor about the ones John the Baptist is speaking to.

What might that wilderness be? First of all, it would be referring to the wilderness of the world we live in. I know that it is hard for most people to visualize. It is hard to visualize our world, in particular in the U.S., as a wilderness. It is counter intuitive to our experience.

We live in paradise. I mean, think about it for a second. I can sit in my over-stuffed recliner, in my comfortably heated family room and access virtually any bit information ever recorded throughout all of history on my laptop from the internet. And while I am doing that I can watch a movie on my TV by tapping into Netflix's library of virtually all movies ever put on DVD. If I get tired of the movie, I can grab another electronic device and push another button which will take me, via satellite, to a football game being played live halfway across the country. And maybe in the middle of it all I might get a buzzing sound on my laptop telling me that I am receiving a live video call from a friend or family member who is travelling on the Autobahn in Germany.

I don't know if you knew this, but right now, there are people in their homes viewing this very service from thousands of miles away. And for those from far away who were not connected to our live-stream, I could take a recording of this sermon, put it on our website, and someone in India could be watching it within minutes and then, equally fast, he or she could respond to me personally with an email that shows up on my cell phone telling me that I'm going long...again.

We have so much. We certainly do not reside in the wilderness. Far from it. We have it all and there will be more under the tree in just weeks. And because of that, we come to think that the message to "repent", to "turn around", must be meant for other, less fortunate, people.

But, John was not just speaking from a place, or even primarily from a place. He was speaking to a condition, a spiritual condition. You see, when we think of wilderness as just a geographical place or just a place of having or not having, when the wilderness is attached to possessions and not to conditions, we have a difficult time connecting to John's message... and the person he came to point to.

But if we look at wilderness as a spiritual condition, a condition of society and a condition of our hearts, then a new picture emerges. Our narrow view takes on a wide vision. In the *Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis makes the case that we are far too easily pleased. I know that you have heard it before, but he tells us that our challenge is not that we expect too much with all the bells and whistles that our technology and our affluence can provide, with all the lights, and food, and sales that come during Christmas. The reality is...the reality is that we expect too little. We expect way too little and we settle way too quickly. Lewis describes it as an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant

by the offer of a vacation at the beach. When we look at what the world can provide us and what we can provide ourselves as the ultimate reward, the pinnacle of joy, and the fullness of meaning, then we are like the child making mud pies and we end up missing God's invitation to prepare the world, and ourselves, to receive something far beyond what we can imagine. But, when we allow ourselves to catch a glimpse of that something bigger, everything takes on a new perspective. When the coming of Christ becomes the center of Advent, the wilderness of our surroundings becomes more apparent and then Advent, and Christmas, take on their true meaning. We should not expect less. We should not settle for anything less.

This is the time of year when the most often asked question is, "What would you like for Christmas this year?" So, I will put that question to all of us. What do we want for Christmas this year? More than that...what do we want and expect *from* Christmas this year?

The message of Advent is that we should think big and we should expect more. We shouldn't settle for anything less. And, on this second Sunday of Advent, we shouldn't try to race on passed John and his message for us. Heeding John's call, we should prepare the way of the Lord in the world and within ourselves and, through that, experience true joy, real love, profound peace, and the real meaning of the season. Why would we settle for mud pies in the slum when so much more is being offered to us? Let's not settle this year!

Expect more... and receive everything.

Amen