

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/04/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, December 4th

Matthew 3:1-12

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New beginnings

The Second Sunday of Advent symbolizes peace. During this season we remember the birth of Jesus and we look forward to His Second Coming. The agent who will transform the world is revealed. In this week's Gospel lection, John the Baptist prepares the way for the Christ. His message can be summarized in one word: Repent! The day is coming when history will end, and God will make all things right. The way to prepare for that day is to repent. Until the Kingdom is fully consummated at Christ's Second Coming, we can turn away from the world we have known and embrace the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst. This is the source of peace on earth and the promise of new beginnings.

Matthew 3:1-12 Commentary

The Gospel lection for this Second Sunday of Advent is the opening section of the preparation for Jesus' public ministry (3:1-4:11) and includes the account of the ministry of John the Baptist. The greatest prophet of all time, John the Baptist (11:11), appears in all four canonical Gospels. John plays an important role in bridging the Old Testament with the New Testament. Despite John the Baptist having a significant following and a separate identity within Judaism (even beyond the New Testament era), Matthew is clear that John the Baptist's significance lies only in preparing the way for Jesus.

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [or come near]

"*In those days*" refers to 2:23 and the time of Jesus' residence in Nazareth. There is clearly a significant time lapse from the ending of 2:23 and 3:1. The time has come where the world will never be the same. There are those who note John the Baptist would have likely had contact with the Essenes - an ancient Jewish ascetic sect of the 2nd century BC–2nd century AD in Palestine, who lived in highly organized groups, held property in common, and practiced ritualistic repentance and baptism. The Essenes are widely considered as the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Perhaps John was a member of such a community who had been called to take his message to all the Jews rather than to recruit for a closed, ritualistic community.¹ While self-administered proselyte baptisms of Jewish converts and the self-administered ritual baptisms of the Essenes were known to the Jews, John the Baptist was the first person to come baptizing others.

¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 95.

Repent (*metanoéō*), to change one's mind or purpose, means a complete change of attitude towards God that impacts all of life's actions and choices. It means the idea of "turning" from one way of living to another. Such genuine repentance results in outward signs of behavior.

The "*Kingdom of Heaven*" (equivalent to the "*Kingdom of God*" in Mark and Luke) represents the rule of God. As Matthew is a Jew writing to other Jews, he is reluctant to use God's holy name. This is the dawning of the last days. God is about to inaugurate His final rule upon the earth. God's will, will indeed be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Something big is about to happen and it demands the right response.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is exactly the message Jesus preached (4:17).

³ *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"*

Matthew makes the connection between John the Baptist, the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 and reflections of Malachi 3:1. In its original context, the Isaiah prophecy spoke of preparing the way for the people of Israel to return from exile through a wilderness to their homeland. Israel was redeemed from its sin. The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is John the Baptist in the wilderness preparing the way for the one who will take away the sins of the world.

⁴ *Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

The appearance of John the Baptist resembles that of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). For many this is seen as fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6, the closing verses of the Old Testament some four hundred years earlier:

⁵ *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes..."* In Matthew, Jesus later identifies John as Elijah and thus the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy (11:11-14; 17:10-13).

⁵ *Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

The hyperbole here reflects the scale of John the Baptist's ministry. Confession of sins is a necessary part of repentance.

⁷ *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.*

Not all the people who came out believed. John warns the religious establishment that their status as Jews would not save them. God could raise up outsiders to follow Him if necessary. Judaism was in danger of being removed unless there was fruit in keeping with repentance.

¹¹ *"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. ¹² 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."*

The closing verses describing John the Baptist's ministry clearly demonstrate the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. John was preparing a remnant for the coming Messiah. His words would have reminded the crowds of two Old Testament prophecies promising the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: Joel 2:28-29 and Malachi

3:2-5 fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. There is heavy symbolism here of what happens to the wheat and the chaff - for those who believe and those who reject.

Reflection

As we prepare our hearts and minds during this Advent season and light the second candle, this Gospel text challenges us to see ourselves in the original audience (although with the vantage point of being born on the other side of the cross).

As a member of the crowd, how do our lives reflect the Kingdom? To what extent do our lives demonstrate repentance? How much fruit are we bearing for the Kingdom? Are we open to moving boldly into the future of what God is willing to cause? Are we clinging to Christ or clinging to the world?

As a member of the "religious establishment," are we unknowingly following in the footsteps of the Pharisees and Sadducees by smugly relying on our status of church membership and tradition? God calls us to live lives that reflect deep change and bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Church membership alone does not produce the *metanoia* we are called to demonstrate. Saving faith bears Kingdom fruit.

As we look at the declining influence of the Christian church in our world today, this text reminds us that Christ is the head of His Church. He is the vine, and we are the branches. If a branch becomes disconnected from the vine, it will perish. Just like the symbolism of the axe at the root of the tree of Israel, we must reflect on the spiritual health our own churches and denominations. Are we rooted in Christ or in our worldly habits and traditions? Are we on Christ's agenda or our own worldly agenda disguised as the Gospel? Are we being the bold disciples we have been called to be or are we playing it safe?

No matter where these reflections lead, one thing is clear: The power of God both calls us and enables us to make deep changes in our lives and orientations. Those who cling to Christ by faith are purified. No matter where we are in our life journey, and no matter what may be happening in the world, we can be at peace because God gives us the promise of a new beginning.

Application

- Where is there disturbing change in your life right now?
- Where do you see God at work among this change?
- Where are new beginnings required in your life?
- How might you be resisting such new beginnings?
- What commitments will you make during this Advent season for such new beginnings?



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