

Sermon December 4, 2022 Advent II

Matthew 3:1-12

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves on the banks of the River Jordan with John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers agree that without John the Baptist there would be no Gospel of Jesus. Jesus himself describes John as a great prophet. John took his mission to declare the arrival of the coming Messiah very seriously.

John proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The Biblical understanding of the term “repent” is shaped by the Jewish experience of exile. To repent, which means to return, is to follow the way of God that leads back into relationship with the God who made us and loves us beyond our understanding. John is relentless—he constantly reminds people of the reality of their faithlessness. He’s like a broken record—or like those endless Camp Lejeune announcements.

To repent doesn’t simply mean to be sorry. In the New Testament, to repent means to begin seeing differently, to begin thinking differently, to acting and living differently. To repent is to change—to repent is to walk humbly with our God. God’s dream is for the world to be a place in which peace and equity – rather than fear and hatred – rule the day. God dreams for the world to be a place where we view each other with compassion and love, where all of creation is full of the mercy and the peace of God.

God dreams of a beloved community where we love one another as neighbors with all our heart, soul, and mind. God calls us to live into this dream--- not next year, not ten years from today, but right now.

John does not just shout, “Repent!” and then stop there. John lets us know why we must repent. The kingdom of heaven has come near. For those of us who follow God in the Way of Love, it is Jesus who defines our new way of seeing, our new mindset, and our way back to God. Deciding to try to live and love like Jesus is what Christian repentance is all about.

Perhaps John, our rugged, self-denying nonconformist was not just yelling about dread and doom, but with a voice filled with hope. What if we choose to hear John’s call – Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near – not as a menacing threat of impending judgement, but as an invitation to live into God’s dream?

Even now, there are prophets rising up in our midst. Our youth dream of having a future in which they can enjoy God's creation, but often feel that their dreams are threatened because of climate change, and violence against the most vulnerable among us—such as black, brown, jews, gays and trans folk.

Our youth are demanding change to protect their lives and God's creation so they and their children may enjoy the abundant life God desires for them – that they may live into God's dream. The vulnerable simply can't afford to be indifferent.

We are invited and called to dream something beyond what we can presently see – the suffering of migrants, of refugees, the homeless, the hungry, and those who have lost loved ones through acts of violence. God offers an invitation to set a course—to follow our dreams—God's dreams. We are not there yet—but **are** we headed in the right direction—following the right path?

We, as children of God, need to heed the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness – the voice that reminds us of God's dream. We need to take the time to seek God's vision for us – to ask, “What does God want us to be and to do?” Is there one part of our lives where we can repent—to change direction—return to the God who loves us.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” – “Repent, live into God's Dream.” This is John the Baptist's invitation for us to come home and to be the people God has created us to be. As a faith community—what can we do to bring hope to an exhausted world? We can be a church that truly welcomes the wolf, the lamb, the calf, and the lion—and little children.

A church's doors can be unlocked and flung wide open. The lights and the heat can all be turned on, and yet from sermon to coffee hour that same church can still be just as exclusive as if armed guards were at the door. People aren't just looking for a friendly church---they are looking for friends. People don't just want to hear about a God who loves them, they want us to love them. That means that we have to purposely step out of our little cliques and intentionally seek out others. You know, the person standing alone at Coffee Hour looking just a bit nervous.

I submit that St. Martin's is the kind of community that Isaiah envisions, and Jesus Christ endorses. That begins with us making conscious decisions to share radical and inclusive love, to speak up when we see barriers being erected even if they are erected in the name of God!

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Love God, love your neighbor, change the world