

12.7.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 3:1-12

I don't know about you, but when I hear a passage like that and we hear, "The word of the Lord" and we're supposed to say, "Thanks be to God," I kind of think, "Thanks be to God? I guess? Maybe?" I don't know how I feel about this passage where John is speaking these really abrasive words.

I can think back to my time when I was living in Scotland, in the United Kingdom. And at one time, the guy that I was seeing was trying to teach me how to drive over there, which I gave up on pretty quickly because it was just too weird being on the other side of the road, driving from the other side of the car. It was not going well. Plus, there are all different kinds of strange signs. There's not the same kind of road signs there that there are over here. I just felt like I had no clue what I was doing. But there were many different interesting road signs over there. One of my favorite ones that I saw that I still think about to this day, was the elderly person crossing sign. On the sign, it's two slightly hunched over people with like a cane or a walker. I mean, that is the sign for elderly people crossing! In other words, "Look out!" You want to be careful because there's going to be some folks coming through who are maybe a little bit slower than others. It was my favorite sign.

But signs give us important information about things that we need to know. We can think about the road signs that we see here. You know, there's a curve ahead, there's falling rocks, there's a bridge out. Those signs matter because they communicate to us something that we need to know, something that we need to be aware of. They exist to wake us up in time so we can prepare or to make whatever change we need when moving forward on the road.

John the Baptist is like Scripture's giant flashing warning sign. Now, if you were here for our Advent lunch this past week, you heard our guest preacher Jake, call John the Baptist the "Grinch of Advent," which I loved as an image. But John the Baptist, he's this crazy looking dude and he appears suddenly in the wilderness. He's wearing camel's hair and he's eating bugs, (yum), shouting a message that sounds like anything but a message of peace. "Repent! The kingdom of heaven has come near." He calls the religious leaders a brood of vipers. It is startling and abrasive. Word of the Lord, right?

And yet, even with John's jarring presentation or delivery of his message, it is fundamentally about peace. But it's not about sentimental peace. It's not about that serene sense of calm. Instead, it is the deep peace of God's kingdom, a peace that requires clearing away everything that gets in the way of love, justice, and truth.

But to understand that, we need to understand who John is. Who was John the Baptist? John does not appear out of nowhere. Matthew presents him as the bridge between the old prophetic tradition and the ministry of Jesus. He's seen as the final OT style prophet: John stands in the line of Elijah—so closely, in fact, that early Christians described him as Elijah returned, preparing the way for the Messiah. He dresses like Elijah. He cries out in the wilderness like Isaiah said a messenger would. He calls Israel not to comfort but to return, realign, and repent.

John is seen as the forerunner of Jesus. John's mission is not self-focused. His entire calling is about preparing people for someone else. He knows he is not the Messiah. His role is to get the world ready for the One who is coming. He is the one who says, "Don't look at me. Get your hearts ready so you can see Him."

John was a critic of empire. His wilderness ministry is deeply political – not partisan, but theological. In John's time, Israel lived under Roman occupation, with a temple leadership structure that often cooperated with imperial power. John steps away from all of that. He does not preach in Jerusalem. He does not seek permission from religious authorities. He creates an alternative space, a wilderness community, where God's kingdom begins to take shape outside empire's reach.

John was a baptizer. Baptism wasn't unheard of in Judaism, but John's baptism is radical. He offers washing not for Gentile converts, not for ritual impurity, but for Israel itself. In other words, John is saying: "God's people need cleansing. God's people need renewal. God's people need repentance." This is not "them." This is us. That is precisely why his voice matters for us today.

John appears in the wilderness. This is also a significant thing to note. The wilderness in Scripture is a place of searching, a place of encountering the divine, a place of relearning identity. It's where Israel re-learns who they are. It's where prophets find clarity. It's where people rediscover dependence on God. It's where false gods and false certainties fall away.

John is bringing a message of divine peace. Peace does not begin in the halls of power. Peace begins instead in the wilderness, the place where distractions fade and truth is revealed. In our noisy world where Christianity is often used to justify political power rather than imitate Jesus, perhaps God is calling us, the church, back into the wilderness to listen again. John's cries out through all of our noise: "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Here's what he's not calling us to: He's not calling us to prepare the way of nationalism, nor the way of political dominance, nor the way of fear-driven religion, but the way of the Lord, whose peace upends systems that rely on violence, exclusion, or control.

In this wilderness, John calls us to repentance. "Repent" simply means to turn. Turn around. Change direction. Start again. Repentance is not about punishment, it is about turning to realize God's possibilities. It is God's gift that frees us from the belief that we cannot change – personally, communally, or as a society. John makes it clear that repentance is not just something that happens inside of us. It has fruit. It has visible, tangible outcomes.

We sometimes think repentance is only about feeling sorry for personal mistakes, but Scripture shows that repentance can also mean turning away from systems, assumptions, and habits of silence. One modern saint who lived this kind of repentance, this fierce, John-the-Baptist kind of peace was Oscar Romero of El Salvador. When Romero became archbishop, he was known as quiet, cautious, someone who tried not to make waves. But after his close friend, Father Rutilio Grande, was assassinated for defending the poor, something in Romero turned. He realized that

the peace he had been practicing, the peace of staying quiet, was not God's peace at all. It was the peace of empire. And so Romero repented. He changed direction. He began to boldly speak the truth, to confront injustice, to call both church and nation to account. Like John in the wilderness, Romero prepared the way for a peace that was rooted in justice, not denial.

What does repentance have to do with peace? Peace requires repentance because you cannot have peace without truth. You cannot have peace while ignoring harm. You cannot have peace while clinging to power. Repentance clears away the debris so God can build something new.

I can remember when the pastor I worked with in Dunbar preached a character sermon as John the Baptist – when he got to the next part of today's passage, I remember how jarring it was. When the Pharisees and Sadducees show up, John does not greet them politely. He calls them a brood of vipers – it wasn't quiet or subtle! Why does he do this? Because they were invested in a system where religion served power – where faith justified hierarchy rather than challenged it! John warns them because misused religion is dangerous.

Which brings us to today. If John the Baptist appeared here, right now, I doubt he would start with those who've been pushed out of church. I imagine he would begin with those who have merged Christianity with nationalism – those who proclaim that God is on the side of our nation, our party, our power, our dominance. We've talked a lot about Christian nationalism here at St. Marks in a nut shell, this is what it does: It confuses the kingdom of God with the nation. It prioritizes power over mercy. It blesses violence done in God's name. It elevates some people above others. It forgets that Jesus was executed by the state, not crowned by it

If John were here today, I imagine he would stand in the places where crosses and flags are waved together and say to those who used both symbols to grasp for power: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance!"

Peace cannot grow where Christian identity is used as a weapon. It cannot grow where fear or oppression of the stranger is preached as gospel truth. Peace cannot grow where power is worshiped and loving our neighbor is an optional thing. John's call to repentance is a call to disentangle ourselves from any system that distorts the gospel into a tool of domination.

As John continues on, his words don't get any easier. He uses the images of the axe and fire but they are not images of threats of condemnation. They are images of clearing and refining. The axe cuts down what no longer bears fruit. The fire burns away the chaff so that good healthy grain can remain.

John's message is not about scaring people into heaven. It is about liberating the world from everything that suffocates peace, love, and justice. In our moment, the axe may need to fall on triumphalism and racism and tribalism. It may need to fall on silence in the face of injustice and the belief that God blesses some people above others. It may need to fall on the belief that Christianity requires political power to survive. These things must be pruned away so that peace can grow.

John baptizes with water, but he says that Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John is speaking of a fire of renewal, not destruction. A fire that reveals truth, empowers justice, and illuminates the path of peace. Jesus comes not to crush us but to transform us. The peace that John calls us to, the Peace of Christ, is not peace that is passive. This peace is not quietism. This peace is the active presence of God reordering the world through love. And it begins with repentance.

Repentance might look like telling the truth about how faith has been misused, or listening to those harmed by the church. It might look like refusing to baptize political agendas in the name of Christ. It might look like confronting racism and white supremacy. It might look like practicing hospitality over suspicion or choosing courage over comfort. It might look like reclaiming Christianity as a movement of humility, mercy, justice, and sacrificial love.

Repentance is not shame, it is hope. It is aligning our hearts with Christ. It is the doorway to peace. Like Romero, who shows us the fierce, prophetic side of peace, the kind that confronts empire head-on, another saint shows us peace lived out in an equally radical, though quieter way. Dorothy Day didn’t stand in pulpits or speak to governments. She lived among the poor in the Catholic Worker houses she helped create. They were places of welcome, food, shelter, and dignity. She believed that repentance meant not only turning away from violence and injustice but turning toward the hard, daily work of loving our neighbor in the most concrete ways possible. When systems failed people, Dorothy did not wait for someone else to fix them. She opened her door. She set the table. She made soup. She marched for justice. She wrote, she protested, and she insisted that the peace of Christ must take flesh in acts of mercy and justice. Where Romero confronted the state, Dorothy confronted indifference. Together, they remind us that the peace of Christ is both prophetic and personal—The peace of Christ is about both truth-telling and table-setting.

As we light the candle of peace this Advent, let us remember that peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the presence of justice. John calls us to prepare the way, not by smoothing things over but by telling the truth, clearing out what harms, and turning our lives toward the Prince of Peace. Saints like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day who have gone before us show us what repentance can look like.

So this Advent, may we step into the wilderness with honesty and hear John’s call as good news. May we repent of all that bears no fruit and resist the forces that distort the gospel. May we open our hearts to the one who brings peace not as the world gives, but as God gives. Peace is coming. But to receive it, we must first turn. We must change direction. We must repent. Today, we remember that the Kingdom of God draws near. Thanks be to God. Amen.