

Matthew 2:1-12

It's the second week of advent...one week closer, but still not quite close enough, right? We getting there, and yet, we still have a ways to go. We want to hear the Christmas story, and we want to think about the little baby, we want to have a little time off of work and school, we want to open presents...of course we want to open presents, maybe we want to see some snow...ok maybe not. But we're just not quite there yet.

Every year on this, the second Sunday in Advent, we hear about John the Baptist. It's a clear reminder that we're just not there yet. It's not a story about Mary, it's not a story about people getting ready for the birth directly, but yet we hear it every year. We hear about him, a familiar story. But do we really **hear** about him? Hear what he has to say? Hear what he has to teach us? Or are we still just thinking about the fact that we aren't quite where we want to be.

We hear about this man who appeared in the wilderness...seemingly out of nowhere it. He seems kind of strange. He wore weird clothes. He ate weird things, though by today's reality TV standards, locusts and wild honey sounds kind of good. We don't know much more about him from Matthew's Gospel, other than what he did...and lucky for us that's the important stuff.

This man was most likely a Nazarite based on his dress and menu choices. Nazarites are talked about in the book of Numbers, and they were people who make the choice to live their lives in strict religious ways. It wouldn't have been a bad thing to have him around, in a lot of ways it would have been seen as lucky. He appeared from the wilderness and called to the people to repent...to get ready because the kingdom of heaven was coming near. It makes a great picture in your mind doesn't it? Picture it with me. This strangely dressed man appearing out of nowhere on the barren land and yelling at the people who are near, and anyone else who might hear the message to Repent! Repent!

Now, we're told that the people came out to him...and I have to wonder if they only came because he was something new in town. He was a spectacle of sorts, so people came to see what all the commotion was about. It's kind of like when you pass a car accident on the road...you don't want to look, but it's not something that you see every day, so everyone slows down to see what's going on. They might not have really cared what his message was, but they wanted to see what everyone was talking about.

But when they got there, apparently they listened to what he had to say. Maybe because he was a religious figure of sorts...he should know what he's talking about, right? Or maybe because he just had some really good arguments that we don't get to hear. Nonetheless, people **listened** to what he had to say. They looked at how he lived his life, it got their attention, and then they listened.

At first, I have a feeling that they didn't like what they were hearing. Who wants to be told that they have to repent...to change what they are doing every day and live in a completely new way. Who wants to hear that? I certainly don't. Do you? Do you want to hear that what you are doing now isn't alright and the only way to be alright is to do what this man is telling you to do? No one wants to listen to that kind of talk.

But they not only listened. They heard what he had to say. They heard him say that the kingdom of

heaven has come near. They heard him say that the way of the Lord needed to be prepared. They heard him say the same things that we hear today. And it changed them. Many were baptized because of what John taught them. The text tells us that they were baptized, confessing their sins.

John's words changed their hearts to the point that they wanted to change their lives. Even people who John didn't like came to be baptized...did you hear what he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees? He called them a brood of vipers...obviously, he wasn't a fan. But yet they came, and they were baptized. And we can hope, that at least for a brief while, they were changed.

So we hear these words today as well. But do we listen to them? Do we hear John saying to us that we need to repent because the day of the Lord is coming? Like we said before, we don't like to hear this, but we need to listen to it. Part of the reason that we don't always listen is that we get to the part about people being baptized, and then we think that it isn't talking about us anymore. It's talking about people who lived a long time ago and needed to be baptized. But just because we've been baptized doesn't mean that we don't have anything to repent.

We start every service with a confession because we know that as humans, we are both sinners and saints at the same time. We are made saints through the waters of our baptism, but because of who we are, we still sin. We still need to repent, and we still need to hear what John is telling us.

We still need to know that the day of the Lord is coming, and we need to know that there is much more to getting ready for it than finishing our shopping, decorating the tree and visiting Santa.

But let's say that we do know this about ourselves. Let's say that we are aware of our short comings – aware of the fact that we are sinners in need of repenting. And that's why we're here – that's why we come to this place – to confess, to worship, to share the meal. We come here to help us prepare for our days in the rest of the world – in a lot of ways, in our own wilderness.

Isn't that honestly a way to look at the world around us? It really is a wilderness – it's full of temptation, distraction. There is no better time to see this than right now. How long have the stores had their Christmas displays up? And how many of them have anything to do with what Christmas is all about?

So what can we learn from this message in the midst of our wilderness? What can John teach us about living in the world and preparing for Christ's birth?

I think one of the most simple things we can take from this lesson is a little bit like that old ad campaign for Gatorade where they had all the people saying I want to be like Mike. We should want to be like John. We should want to be like the one who got their attention by how he lived his life. Now, I'm not suggesting any bold fashion statements or new diet fads, but just simply living our lives in a way that makes people wonder what's so different about you. Why does she always seem to be at peace – my lift is so crazy all the time? Why does he always ask how I am each day? He seems like he cares. To live our lives in a way that makes others come and see what makes the differences – what makes us that way. To call people out of the wilderness of their lives and into the light of Christ.

So as we continue to prepare – for Christ's birth, for Christ's return – let that be our prayer...that we will one day be remembered like John – as one who's very life caused people to listen, to change, and to know the risen Lord. Thanks be to God for that chance. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

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