

December 5 2010 Sermon

(Matthew 3:1-12 ESV)

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

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.'"

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.

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.

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.

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."

John preached in the wilderness. What is a wilderness? It is a dry, inhospitable place where only vipers and scorpions can survive. For humans it is synonymous with death. And into that wilderness came two kinds of people to hear John preach: one was a group of ordinary, everyday Israelites who lived in the tradition of the Old Testament and its messianic promises. Among them were tax collectors and sinners who repented of their sins. They were humble people, and when John preached "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near," they recognized their sin, and repented. They were the poor in spirit of whom Jesus later said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They submitted to Baptism for the forgiveness of their sins, and unto them the kingdom of

heaven came. In baptism God snatched them out of the wilderness of Satan's kingdom and transferred them into the kingdom of heaven. And because they received the Holy Spirit in Baptism, they declared God just and understood the purpose of God for themselves—salvation and eternal life.

The other crowd were the Pharisees and Sadducees. They did not repent of their sins, because they did not accept the fact that they had any sin. They were the religious people, the ones who were living holy and righteous lives. They were the spiritually mature, the wise, the ones more advanced in their faith. They were guides to the blind; lights to those in darkness; instructors of the foolish; teachers of the children. They looked at the rest with disdain and scorn. They sat in judgment over others pointing out their sins and shortcomings and failures. They were the righteous and could sit in judgment over the people around them who were not as good as they. So they had no reason to be baptized by John. John called them vipers because they lived in the wilderness of impenitence.

And to both crowds of people John called out: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." One crowd prepared the way by being baptized. They understood God's purpose for them. They were later baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit and the fire of purification and cleansing.

The other crowd rejected the preaching of John and the work of the Holy Spirit, and these did not understand the purpose of God for their lives and later they rejected and crucified Jesus himself. Theirs was not the kingdom of heaven, and so when the axe was laid to the root of the tree that didn't bear fruit; they were cut down and thrown into the unquenchable fire of torment and gnashing of teeth. Like the fig tree that Jesus cursed because it didn't have any fruit. Like another unfruitful tree that the owner wanted to cut down and throw away, these people, in the end, were the chaff that was threshed from the wheat and thrown into the fire. For they not only rejected John's Baptism, they rejected the Christ himself.

Which of these two crowds are you in? The fact is, you are in both! Both these groups of people represent you, sometimes you are a pious and humble people repenting of your sins and submitting to the means of grace for forgiveness. At these times you follow the movements of the Spirit of God in you, and the new man born in you at Baptism appears. You trust in the Lord in times of illness or suffering with holy patience. You love and serve your neighbor and joyfully receive the Word of God and Holy Communion. You repent of your sins and receive Holy Absolution.

But there is also a wilderness inside of you where only the viper lives. At times the vipers take over your life. The vipers of pride and unrepentance. The viper of doubt that causes you grief and sorrow in times of distress and loss and sickness. The vipers of sinful thoughts and desires and impure motives even for the good things you do. In this wilderness the vipers of bitterness and judgmentalism live and thrive. Here lies the belief that you are better than others. It is in the wilderness that you believe you are a light to those in darkness and a guide to the blind. In this wilderness reigns only death and darkness. The vipers and scorpions, raise up their ugly heads and enjoy biting and stinging your friends, your family members, the people you work with, and even the people you attend church with. The axe is poised, ready to cut down the barren trees and dry thistles of this wilderness and cast them into the unquenchable fire.

You are like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: at times Dr. Jekyll appears, that good, gentle, peaceful, pious, loving, Christian, guided by the Holy Spirit who loves and serves his neighbor. But at other times Mr. Hyde appears, the evil of your sinful human nature, hating and despising, desiring to put to death any and everyone who cross your path. He is that monster of sin that lives inside your secret life of dark thoughts and desires. Sometimes Dr. Jekyll comes out, but at other times it is Hyde who takes over.

But into your wilderness comes John the Baptist preaching, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” Remember your baptism for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came for you in Baptism he took you into the kingdom of heaven. In Baptism the axe chopped down the wilderness inside and cast it into the fire. In Baptism a new, spiritual man of holiness was born in you. You were taken out of the wilderness and placed into the kingdom of heaven, “you passed from death into life.” Your Baptism is what prepared the way of the Lord; the highway was made straight, the valley was brought up, the high place was made plain and the crooked place was made straight. The waters of Baptism changed the wilderness into a garden and drowned the vipers. Oh, yes, that old viper does sometimes raise his ugly head still, but you have been covered with the righteousness of Jesus himself. That old, sinful nature is not gone, it is covered with Christ’s holiness. In Baptism you were clothed with Christ, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Galatians 3:27).” The righteousness of Jesus which covers your sins is greater than the evil of your sinful nature. The perfection of Jesus is stronger than the sin in your being. The holiness of Jesus is more pure than the impurity of your flesh. The light of Jesus is brighter than the darkness of your soul. The hope of Christ is far greater than any despair and loss we shall ever suffer in this life. And in Baptism you received the Holy Spirit who has sealed you in faith.

The axe was poised to cut down that barren tree in your wilderness; but instead it cut down Jesus who made himself barren with your sin. It cut him down and cast him into the unquenchable fire in your place. He was “cut off from the land of the living, stricken for your transgression.” We do not submit to the will of the Father, but Jesus’ submission to the will of his Father is his righteousness. In your Baptism he became your righteousness. “This is the name by which he will be called: the Lord is your righteousness. (Jeremiah 23).”

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s coming this Christmas, remember, the way has been made ready for the Lord, the path is straight, because Jesus is the path and the way. He is the way, the truth and the life of the Father. Jesus is your righteousness. On the last day when God judges you, it is Jesus who will stand in the court to be judged in your place. It is Jesus who will be judged for you, and the “not guilty” of Jesus will be your verdict. In other words, you will be judged on the basis of Jesus’ perfect righteousness and holiness.

Yes, as long as you remain on this earth, the wilderness will remain in your heart and the viper will sometimes take over. But the perfect righteousness of Jesus makes up for your failure to be perfect. Jesus stands in the way of God’s fire and blocks it. He was baptized with the fire of God’s wrath. What you have failed to do right, Jesus already did for you. When you failed to love God with all your heart, mind and soul, Jesus already loved him in your place. When you failed to love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus already loved him for you. And all this righteousness and love is applied to your record when you

were baptized. You will not be judged on the basis of your failure to be holy, rather you will be judged on the basis of the holiness of Jesus.

Therefore, O baptized Christian, take heart: The way is prepared, the path is straight. You have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and with the purifying fire of God's holiness and goodness. Go in peace this Advent Season as you watch for the coming of Jesus, not only in a manger, but also now in the word, in Baptism, in absolution, and in Holy Communion, and finally, watch for him in the air as he returns in the clouds surrounded by hosts of angels in glory and power to take you into heaven, forever and ever. Amen.