

### Matthew 3: 1-12 What is HE Doing Here?

Portions of our reading from Matthew this morning, on the morning we light the candle of Peace seems to be out of place. Matthew's narrative does include the birth of Jesus, unlike Mark and John, but it is not the gospel story that is read on Christmas Eve. The role of Joseph in the story is told as well as the presentation of Jesus at the Temple according to Jewish ritual. There are no angels singing or shepherds visiting the new born child in Matthew's narrative. Our passage on this Sunday morning occurs on the banks of the Jordan just before the adult Jesus re-enters the scene. And despite the introduction of John the Baptizer being grounded in the words of the prophet Isaiah this passage does not introduce the theme of peace. Matthew uses words from Isaiah, just not the words that we read from the vision of the peaceful kingdom where the wolf shall live with the lamb. That passage from Isaiah 11 speaks of what happens after the shoot that comes out of the root of Jesse has dealt with the wicked. Today's passage from Matthew draws on the words from Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." For Matthew and the early believers this voice was understood to be John the Baptizer who indeed was a voice in the wilderness; a voice calling on the people to repent of their ways. Matthew gives us a physical description of John which clues us in to an unconventional man, one who wore clothing of camel's hair fastened with a leather belt. His diet was locusts and wild honey. John was a man living outside of the society around him. The message he proclaimed was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John's message is understood by Matthew and us as being one which points to the presence of Jesus: Jesus the Messiah who will usher in God's kingdom. This understanding is why John the Baptist makes an annual visit in the midst of our Advent readings. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." says John. But John's message placed that coming in the immediate future if not the present, the kingdom of heaven has come near. This reference to the kingdom of heaven was Matthew's way of pronouncing God's coming reign while avoiding as was Jewish custom, the use of the Holy name. God was about to fix the world. And that nearness of the kingdom meant that time was short, that the Day of Judgment was near and that God was going to deal with the wickedness of the people to make way for that post-judgment vision found in Isaiah. So John's message is calling for repentance **now**. It led the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region along the Jordan to respond to the message, to confess their sin and be baptized in the Jordan River. Although our understanding of baptism is different from that in the Jewish tradition, the use of water as a symbol of spiritual or ritual cleansing was common. It is in this recognition that there is need for repentance that we find another reason that John the Baptist and this somewhat uncomfortable passage is found in our Advent readings. Among those who also come to the Jordan seeking baptism by John are many Pharisees and Sadducees. John's message to them is anything but peaceful. "He said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is

lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Cutting down and burning with unquenchable fire is not a peaceful image. In this continuance of the message we find that the call to repent doesn’t just mean to regret your actions, or to express sorrow over them in a confession. The word in Hebrew contains the verb for walk and literally means to walk in the opposite direction. In Greek, the meaning of the word is essentially the same, it is to change direction. Repentance in the Biblical sense then means something profound which has obvious results: to turn around, to do a 180. It doesn’t mean to list your sins, although that is a necessary beginning. When John the Baptist appears in the midst of our preparations for the celebration it is a reminder that there is something wrong. Something was wrong in the world then. Something is wrong in the world now. Something is wrong within us. However uncomfortable it may be to consider this in the midst of our Yuletide parties and preparations, repent is a word we must encounter. “Repent” implies, quite simply and obviously that something is wrong and that we cannot dodge that fact. It means we must—always and repeatedly—be correcting our course. That is why a prayer of confession is always a part of our worship, to remind us of our continual need to work on the “crooked paths” of our lives, to prepare the way of the Lord by straightening out our ways. In order to prepare for the advent of Christ we must own up to this fundamental fact: there is that in us and in the world that is wrong and needs changing. I would guess that most of us are familiar with C.S. Lewis as the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. This is a Christian allegory. You might not realize that Lewis was for many years an atheist. After his acceptance of Christ he gave some BBC talks which were later put together into a book titled “*Mere Christianity*.” The entire book is well worth reading, but for our purpose this morning I want to use the first of the four sections of the book. Lewis begins this work with what might be called a riff on John the Baptist. He never mentions him, but Lewis brings us to the threshold of Christian faith in exactly the same way that John the Baptist does—by pointing out the “big problem” we have. What might be called the proverbial elephant in the room, namely that the fact that there is something wrong...in the world and in us. Lewis terms this “the terrible fix we are in.” After describing this terrible fix, Lewis, like John the Baptist, offers us some blunt words. Lewis says, “Christianity simply does not make sense until you have faced the sort of facts that I have been describing. Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness.” Lewis then continues, “It (Christianity) therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know that they have done anything to repent of and do not feel that they need forgiveness.” For both of these men, the point is that you cannot just go directly to the grace, the love and the forgiveness that Christmas and Christianity embody without passing through the repentance that John the Baptist’s message gives us. So we have to acknowledge the brokenness in our world, and in ourselves. But the message is not just that we have to acknowledge the brokenness, the sin which has such power in us and in our world, we must work to live into the deeper meaning of the word: repent. John told the Pharisees and the Sadducees that they must bear fruit worthy of repentance. Lip service was not enough. That 180 degree turn had to be made. Our passage concludes with these words: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” We are not given in this passage

why the Pharisees and Sadducees are termed a brood of vipers. They belonged to the groups in Israel who were the most pious observers of the Law. Matthew does not name any specific deeds. But they have to repent. They cannot rely on their status as children of Abraham because the choice is God's as to who belongs in the granary and who constitutes the chaff. It is clear only that they need to change, to find a new way to live and to bear fruit which demonstrates that change in their lives. Matthew's presentation indicates that the good news of the coming reign of God may not be universally received as good news unless change happens. Even the brood of vipers is offered the option to repent and bear good fruit. So we know why John the Baptist appears on the Advent scene. John the Baptist's appearance continues the theme that begins Advent; we need to be ready, we need to prepare to receive Christ into our lives. Not just a celebration of a historical event, no matter how earth changing it was. Not just for some in the future coming, for which we do not and cannot have a timetable. We need to recognize our deep need of the saving love of Jesus Christ here and now. We need to recognize that we don't have to remain as we are. We can acknowledge our failures and know with confidence that the promise made to us is that with repentance comes mercy. There is a brand new path available that has been straightened, not by us but by our Lord who so loves us that God became Emmanuel: God with us.

Thanks be to God.