

# The Kingdom of Heaven is Upon You

*A sermon at Holy Eucharist on the Second Sunday of Advent, 2025*

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*Matthew 3:1-12*

*In the course of time John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness, proclaiming this message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is upon you!' It was of him that the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'A voice cries in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him.' John's clothing was a rough coat of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Everyone flocked to him from Jerusalem, Judaea, and the Jordan valley, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them: 'Vipers' brood! Who warned you to escape from the wrath that is to come? Prove your repentance by the fruit you bear; and do not imagine you can say, "We have Abraham for our father." I tell you that God can make children for Abraham out of these stones. The axe lies ready at the roots of the trees; every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire. I baptize you with water, for repentance; but the one who comes after me is mightier than I am, whose sandals I am not worthy to remove. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing-shovel is ready in his hand and he will clear his threshing-floor; he will gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn on a fire that can never be put out.'*

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In the Bible, when someone is in the wilderness, they are in a place that is not like the realm that most people inhabit. Just as is the case in Canada today, in the Bible, the wilderness is a place where one is vulnerable in ways that are not present in a city or village, or even on a rural family farm. To be in the wilderness means to be away from familiar supports and routines, but also away from distractions and preoccupations.

Along with the lack of safety in the wilderness comes with an opportunity. That vulnerability makes the wilderness, often, a place of encounter with God and a place of profound formation. Many Christians today seek to recreate this disruption of the familiar and openness to God in the form of spiritual retreats. Places away from home and routine that makes us vulnerable to God's appearances in our lives.

John the Baptist, the Forerunner of Christ, is the greatest of God's prophets. The last one to appear before the coming of Christ. He is known as a man of the wilderness, clad in animal skins and eating only what he can forage. He prays, seeks guidance from God, and, when he returns to places where people live, he preaches repentance. John calls the people of Israel to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God.

The circumstances of John's life are not an accident. He is not a prophet who only speaks of what is to come, he is a prophet whose life is an embodiment of the prophecy for his people. John the Baptist's life is an embodied retelling of the Exodus story. He leaves the circumstances into which he was born—the son of a temple priest in Roman-occupied Jerusalem—to live in the wilderness, following God. He wanders, prays, and seeks guidance from God about the message God's people need to hear. John eats

only food that he can gather, wild honey and locusts are his manna.

John's recapitulation of the Exodus story is not an accident. When God delivers Israel from their enslavement, they are led to the wilderness to be formed as a repentant people.<sup>1</sup> In the wilderness, Israel remembers how to follow where God leads by tracking the cloud of smoke and pillar of fire. They are reminded that all things come from God; the very food and water they need to live are supplied each morning by a daily miracle. Israel's complete dependence on God is illustrated and reinforced for generations so that, when they do come into the promised land, they will not forget their covenant again. And, famously, this time of formation and repentance begins with Israel's passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

Generations and centuries later, John the Baptist is calling his people to change their minds, change their hearts, and repent as the time of the Messiah draws near. The kingdom of heaven is coming; they must leave behind self-importance and the promises of false idols. This repentance begins in the waters of the River Jordan, washing away sin and passing through water as the beginning of a journey toward a new life. When Jesus appears and is preparing for his own earthly ministry, he is baptized by John in the same water. Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness, preparing himself for what is to come. When he returns, he begins to call disciples and begins to preach a message like that of John, though more urgent: "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is upon you."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It is important to remember that repentance is not a synonym for punish. It is a changing of the heart and a reorienting of focus, away from distractions and false idols, back toward God.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 4:17

We might think, at first, that the kingdom of Heaven being present sounds like a great thing. Closer to God and ready for the peace, joy, and love that have so long been promised as the foundation of our lives. But, as we reflected last week on Jesus' words about what the arrival of the kingdom means, we remember that there is work to do. With the kingdom of Heaven comes God's judgement of the living and the dead.

We know that God's judgement is a reconciling one, restoring everything to the place and state for which it was created. But we also know that ridding ourselves of that which does not belong in the kingdom of Heaven is an intense process. John baptizes people with water, to wash away sin and help prepare them. But Jesus baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> John's baptism prepares what is already present. Jesus' baptism transforms what is present. Transformation is hard, hard work.

John the Baptist was the Forerunner of Christ. The greatest of the prophets, calling everyone to make ready for the first coming of the Messiah. We have seen the consequences of the first coming of Christ. Each one of us is here, today, in church because of the first coming of Christ. The fact that there is a church at all is a consequence of this first coming. It continues to change the world every single day.

We might hear the message of John the Baptist and treat it as an interesting chapter in the story of Jesus. Or a set of instructions and warnings intended for people many generations ago. To treat John's call to repentance as a thing of the past, safely forgotten other than one Sunday in Advent would be a mistake. Even as we prepare to celebrate and give thanks for the first coming of Christ and all of the blessings we know as a

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew 3:11

result, we must remember that Christ promised to return. We should hear the Baptist's call to repentance and remember that we are still being led by God and this means prayerfully discerning how we ought to follow. We should renew our thanksgiving for God's blessings and acknowledge our complete dependence on God for everything we need. We should take the opportunity, on this Advent journey of preparation, to leave behind those parts of our lives that we know do not belong in the kingdom of Heaven.

What a blessing it is to know a God who would leave the glory of heaven and become like us so that we might become like God.<sup>4</sup> We must repent, make room in our hearts, and prepare to meet our God, for the kingdom of Heaven is upon us.

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<sup>4</sup>St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54:3