

Matthew 3:1 - 12 - *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

⁷*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to 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. ¹⁰Even 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. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His 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.”*

Isaiah 11:1 – 10 - *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

¹⁰*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

Romans 15:4 – 13 - *⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.*

⁵*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁷*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; ¹⁰and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; ¹¹and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; ¹²and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”*

¹³*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our God, who seeks to fill each of us with joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our texts this morning are filled with messages and offer lots of different directions one could go in preaching. My focus however, kept coming back to Isaiah’s word picture, ⁶*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.* When I read these words, it is easy to have a visual in my mind of a peaceful countryside, blue sky, green fields, birds flying overhead, all manner of animals grazing together and young children playing right alongside.

My husband's favorite text was also about peace. In John 14:27, Jesus says, *'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'* Personally, I tend to read this verse, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,"* skipping over the line, *"I do not give to you as the world gives."* I want to focus on the end result of peace and tranquility. I have carried that scripture in my head and heart over the past two+ years, praying that I would feel that peace within. It hasn't been a peaceful journey, rather one with bumpy roads and brokenness. It has also been a time of realizing that God's peace is not of this world. We can't leave out Jesus' words, *"I do not give to you as the world gives.'* God's peace is about repairing our brokenness. Before something can be repaired, the brokenness has to be acknowledged and sorted out.

Much like this vase which was part of an art and spirituality class that looked at how each of us was broken by life's experiences and yet, still whole. I broke this vase with a hammer and then had to put it back together. I had to sort out the pieces to determine how it went back together and acknowledge those places where it couldn't be mended back to the original. In one place there was a pretty good size hole – it had to be filled with new material. There are steps involved in the repair work. That is also true as God prepares our hearts for God's kingdom. Hopefully there won't be any hammers involved, although sometimes I have felt like God kind of knocked me in the head to get me to pay attention. Addressing and repairing our brokenness and the brokenness in the world may involve change – change in our thinking, change in our actions and stepping out into unknown places. It may be challenging.

In Isaiah, before the lion lies down with the lamb, ⁴ *...with righteousness he (God) shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall*

kill the wicked. God will bring to light the brokenness and take action to bring about justice and righteousness. Yes, God promises righteousness and a better life for the Israelites when he rescues them out of captivity in Egypt, but it is to the wilderness that God leads them. And it is in the wilderness and 40 years of wandering that they are tested but also strengthened in faith. Our Isaiah text was written for the Israelites when they were in captivity in Babylon. It is a reminder to them of the time in the wilderness; of their brokenness and of God's promises and that they should trust in those promises.

It is the brokenness in the world and in the people that John the Baptist is lifting up in our gospel text. He uses some pretty strong language. Those who were listening should not have had difficulty understanding what it was they needed to do. He says very bluntly to the crowd who gathered near him seeking baptism, "You brood of vipers!" John calls them to task – who do they think they are? It sounds as though those who heard John's call to repentance may not have taken his call seriously, rather putting their trust in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham, one of God's chosen. Somehow that made them already saved? John is clear that is not enough! He says they must bear fruits worthy of repentance – their actions must reflect their true repentant hearts.

Repentance is the activity of reviewing one's actions and feeling contrition or regret for past wrongs. *It generally involves a commitment to personal change and the resolve to live a more responsible and humane life.* That second part is what John was speaking about – the commitment that follows repenting, to really make change, to live differently – more responsibly. Who do we think we are? Baptized children of God, saved by the gift of the Holy Spirit through the waters of our baptism and God's gracious gift of the baby Jesus come to live among us? How will we stand up to Christ's winnowing fork? Do those around us know we are a child of God?

We live in a broken world, one filled with real challenges, especially for those of us blessed to live in the United States – a nation of many freedoms, great wealth, and choice. Despite that the media brings all the poverty, crime and violence of the world to us almost instantly to our fingertips on the latest technology, most of us still live out our daily lives in safety, with plenty to eat and a warm house and a bed to sleep in. Yet we are also a nation where people can be found in every community who go to bed hungry; are homeless sleeping under bridges, under trees or in cardboard boxes; where children are abused; where guns seem to kill someone every day; and where education is not equal. We are a nation that has millions of people on food stamps, inequalities in healthcare, and where elderly make daily decisions between food and medications.

John calls us to make a difference! He uses a tree analogy that puts it pretty clearly – ‘if the tree does not bear good fruit, it is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ With the roots cut off from the nutrition it receives from the leaves, rain and sunshine, it cannot grow. It is what lies beneath the surface, the ground that brings new life – that brings forth change. Just saying the words, “I repent,” isn’t enough – our actions – what comes forth from that internal commitment to change must be lived out in visible signs. What lies beneath our surface? Are we Christians in name only, or just on Sunday morning? Just as the seed that lies beneath the ground gives life to a new tree, the repentance within us can give new life to our lives as Christians, and maybe bring change to our broken world.

Yes, we wait in hope for the day when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and pain and destruction will cease – that time of peace. But John the Baptist calls us out of placidness and complacency to go out into the world, to speak up for injustices, to take action against the unrighteousness of our world. He calls us to go where it might not be so peaceful, to reach out to people who may make us uncomfortable because they live differently than we do. That old adage, ‘actions speak louder than words,’ seems to fit well here as do words that my Mom used

to say often to my brothers and me – ‘share,’ ‘be fair,’ don’t pick a fight. With my children I added – ‘accept others differences.’

As our Advent journey continues, we wait in the darkness for God’s light to come to us in the Christ child. Advent is a season of reflection, repentance, and refreshment. May we not get so caught up in the busyness of the world, that we forget to reflect on what Advent and Christmas are really about. Let’s take time to seek the light. Advent provides us with the opportunity to consider how we measure up to John’s call to repentance. It is a time to acknowledge the brokenness within and around us and with compassion and acceptance, take steps as we are able to initiate change. It is a time to open our hearts and minds that *“the God of steadfastness and encouragement (may) grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus,⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* It is time for each one to be a beacon for Jesus sharing God’s light in the world that all may one day know that peace which passes all understanding.

Amen.