

7 December 2025
Second Sunday of Advent A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

In the Name of God, whose coming we await. Amen.

If you are in the market for a warm and cuddly figure for these cold weeks before Christmas, I have a secret to tell you. John the Baptist isn't it. There is nothing gentle or sweet about him.

Dressed in funny clothes, eating odd food, John lets us have it: "You brood of vipers!" Repent! Wake up! Bear fruit! John is a biblical version of the old guy down the street yelling, "get thee off my lawn!"

The writer of Matthew's gospel makes a point of telling us that John appears in the wilderness and cries out in the wilderness. In spite of its desolation and barrenness, the wilderness becomes a must-see destination, and the fear-of-missing-out crowds stream out to hear him.

What is up with the wilderness for the season of Advent? Maybe the answer lies in that old real estate mantra, "Location, location, location." Location matters. Where we live matters. Where we stand matters even more. Location matters. The wilderness matters. Are you sensing a theme here?

And it is into this place, the wilderness, that the word of God comes. "Repent," John cries out, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Repent. The Greek word here is *metanoia* (μετάνοια). Change. Change your mind. Change your heart. Change direction. Repent. Turn around, the kingdom of heaven has come near. It is not what you have been expecting, and it is not where you have been looking for it. Repent, turn, it is right over there ... in the wilderness.

Holy Scripture reminds us that God is constantly appearing over there, in the wilderness. Moses encountered the burning bush in the wilderness, with nobody around to tag him on Instagram. The Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

Facing the wrath of Jezebel, Elijah ran for his life, finding refuge in a cave in the wilderness, finally able to hear the still, small voice of God. There was wilderness in Jerusalem when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and exiled the people.

Jesus would spend forty days in the wilderness, learning about who and what he was. But for us, today, John the Preparer is out there in the wilderness, clearing the way for the Day that is surely coming.

Today we hear a lot about stumps and roots. We have our own recent experience of stumps. On my daily walks through my neighborhood and in Forest Park, after the May tornado, I was surrounded by stumps, often twisted and torn almost clean out of the ground. So much destruction and loss. Then, gradually, and to my surprise, nearly every one of those scarred stumps was pushing up leafy green shoots. Life is incessant – and insistent.

Too often, I think, we tend to get lost in the language of unquenchable fire, and lose sight of the stump out of which God brings forth new growth -- growth that the prophets call shoot or branch that shall stand as a signal to the peoples, and which becomes the Tree of Life.

St. Paul reminds the Romans that the root of Jesse, by which he means both the Cross and Jesus, is the fulfillment of God's promises. He closes that passage with these words: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.*

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But we do need to think about fire for a moment. John the Baptist mentions it twice. First, about Jesus who will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And then there is the unquenchable fire, the place where the chaff gets tossed.

We Episcopalians, especially liberals and progressives, have a reputation, perhaps deserved, for avoiding talk about sin. For those who grew up in fundamentalist circles, "sin" gets all knotted up with shame and guilt and condemnation – with precious little talk about redemption. Some of us distrust the word because we see how readily it can be manipulated to justify one moralistic or political agenda over another. We humans are experts at weaponizing our concept of sin to "other" and dehumanize those whom we fear.

Nevertheless, Advent begins with an old-school, straightforward, wilderness-style reckoning with sin. On our journey to Bethlehem, you and I cannot get around John the Baptist, who is all about repentance.

Is it possible that *metanoia*, that repentance, might become an occasion of relief? Can you think of someone in your life who hit bottom and had to repent, to change direction? Who, even if the process was long and excruciating, now lives with a lightness they never had before their chaff got burned away?

Maybe some of us are like the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were curious about John's message, but had a smug sense of security and entitlement because they were

children of Abraham. A modern version might have them saying, "Sure, maybe I've got a few issues. Sometimes I miss the mark...a little."

These slick words blunt the reality of our struggle with sin. In the simplest of terms, sin is a refusal to become fully human. And, sins are all the techniques and rationalizations we use to fool ourselves into thinking that we are different from and better than those other people. Or, that we're self-made, and not reliant on God. But the story of the people of God is that sin started at a tree in a garden, and has been redeemed by, and on, a tree.

When we try to find comfort by hiding behind any other claim of identity, whether it is race or gender or sexuality or class or ability or income or denomination or education, or anything else, John the Baptist reminds all of us that we cannot rely on our own power, or even the powers of this world to make us children of Abraham. We can only rely on the grace of God.

In the wilderness, there is no safety net, there is no backup plan. Deprived of our security blankets, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. Because they do.

The power that is coming is God's power, and it is only when we recognize our need for God's saving grace, and turn down the volume on the noise of this world, that will we begin to hear the voice of the one crying in the wilderness.

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I want to tell you a story. It's not a sin story, but a wilderness story. Last week was the anniversary of the death of one of my Connecticut friends, Paul. Paul grew up in a lot of wildernesses. Impoverished childhood, an ongoing boxing match with drugs and alcohol; a rough slog through early recovery. And then, lots of new growth. Long-term sobriety, loving spouse and kids, successful business. Then came a terrible struggle with leukemia, including a bone marrow transplant that didn't take. But, through it all, he remained both completely joyful and completely serious about his spiritual life, even as he languished in this new wilderness of illness.

Nearly every day, in the late morning, Paul could be found sitting in the sanctuary of First Church Congregational in Fairfield, where I was Director of Music and Organist. It is a grand nineteenth century building whose brownstone walls are pierced by Tiffany stained-glass windows. Some mornings we spoke, but often not, just smiling to each other across the dim silence.

One winter day, coming to practice, I saw Paul sitting there, with no lights on. I said, "why are you sitting in the dark?" He smiled up at me, gestured to the glorious glowing glass, and said, "Dude, I'm not in the dark."

Fast forward a year. Hundreds of brokenhearted people gathered at First Church to say goodbye to this well-beloved man. Paul had asked me to play a postlude that was particularly loud and fast. And, I had prepared to play music on the organ beforehand, music that I hoped might be a balm for our friends.

Twenty minutes before the hour, a local transformer exploded, plunging us into, yep, darkness. Well, almost darkness.

We all had to change, to refocus our eyes and re-tune our ears in this electronic wilderness. There was, in fact, plenty of light. And we could all hear almost everything.

The laughter was loud and authentic; the tears were frequent and unjudged; the silences were profound and comforting. Stripped of our technological safety blankets, we could be only one thing – human, and dependent upon one another, listening, as one, to stories about the many ways God had spoken to us through the life of our friend.

Ironically, the power came back on at the very end of the service, and I got to say my farewell to Paul with that loud, fast postlude. But what I remember most about that day is what I heard in the deep silences of the electronic wilderness.

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As you continue on your Advent journey, I invite you to look around; to see where you might need to change direction. Where is your chaff? Where are you stumps? Where are you stumped? Where are the wilderness places in your life, in your heart, in this community and in the world? Where are the places of hopelessness and desolation?

Can you begin seeing grace in those places? Maybe even a shoot or two of new growth? Can you see the coming of God in those places? Can you begin to hear the voice that calls you to hope rather than fear? How is God calling you to change so that you might reflect light and hope into the wilderness places where you stand?

Today, we are called to repentance and hope. Today, may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we, too, may say to the world, “Dude, I’m not in the dark.” Let us pray.

God, our healer, whose mercy is like a refining fire: Touch us with your judgment and confront us with your tenderness; that, being comforted by you, we may reach out to a troubled world, crying, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.” Amen.