

Second Sunday of Advent  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
4 December 2022

Matthew 3:1-12

Today we have a story of two cousins who could not be any more different: John lives in the wilderness, while Jesus is a city or town-dweller. John dresses in camel's hair, while Jesus dresses in the customary tunics and sandals (perhaps even turbans) of the day. In fact John has more in common with the prophet Elijah than with Jesus. In 2 Kings 1:8 Elijah is described as, "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." We also know that, like Elijah, John eats locusts and wild honey, while Jesus is able to enjoy the customary foods of the day. In fact, by quoting Isaiah, John claims to be the one the prophets had anticipated. John is the one whose job it was to prepare the way for the Messiah, while Jesus is the Messiah himself. John was the Elijah archetype which was to return to earth before the coming of the Christ, while Jesus is the Christ announced by the prophets and promised by God for centuries.

The Gospel tells us that John was very popular. His ministry was growing as people from all over the place came to see and hear him. His message was a simple one: repent and bear good fruit. The word for repentance in Greek means to change one's mind. In Hebrew the same word means to change one's ways. I believe that in John the Baptist the mandate to repent has both meanings. Repent by confessing, acknowledging your sins, and by changing your way of thinking about God. Repent also by producing the fruits that one who has repented of his sins produces. Belief and action cannot be separated in John. He reminds us that it is easy to say things and make affirmations such as, "I am sorry," or "Will you forgive me," and then continue on offending, sinning, and failing to produce good fruits. For John the Baptist in Matthew a repentant life is easily witnessed by others. The only way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah is to repent and amend our lives. To repent and continue repenting. To bear and continue bearing fruit. I say, "continue repenting" and "Continue bearing fruit" because repentance is not an event, but a never ending series of events. Repentance is a lifestyle. We repent daily for the offenses we commit daily. We bear fruit daily because we need to repent daily. Bearing fruit is the logical consequence of leading repentant lives. This is the only possible way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. There are no short cuts. There is no hypocritical grandstanding. There is no smoke or mirrors. We either repent or we don't. Once we are in, we must be all in!

John shows great impatience with those who believe they can speak on God's behalf, while not repenting of their own sins and while not bearing good fruits. There were some Pharisees and Sadducees who came to visit John the Baptist today. The reading tells us that they came "for baptism." I believe this may be the wrong translation. The word translated here "for," can also be translated as "about", or even "against." So in fact, these folks are not interested in repentance and baptism. These are critical observers.

These are spies that came to see what the hoopla was all about (For more on this read Stophregen at [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com)). This are religious figures who want to speak for God, without the necessity of repentance and good fruit.

When John saw them, he said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." Now, here is where insults come into place. For a first century Palestinian to be called a brood of vipers was a great insult. Let me read from a theological commentary "Matthew may allude to a fairly widespread ancient view that vipers were mother killers. In the fifth century B.C. Herodotus declared that new-born Arabian vipers chewed their way out of their mothers' wombs, killing their mothers in the process. Herodotus believed that they did so to avenge their fathers, who were slain by the mothers during procreation; later writers applied his words to serpents everywhere. Perhaps in line with such thought a widely influential Greek drama had included the insult 'mother-killing dragon;' more distantly but still relevant to the image of familial strife, a stepmother hostile to the children of the former wife is a 'viper' to them. Calling his hearers vipers may have been an insult, but calling them "offspring of vipers" accused them of killing their own mothers, indicating the utmost moral depravity" (Keener, as quoted by Stophregen at [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com)).

The charge here is that the Pharisees and Sadducees are as slide as serpents. They are cunning and conniving. They presume to speak for God because they say to themselves and others, "We have Abraham as our ancestor." But they forget that the only reason why they are ancestors of Abraham is because God himself was able to turn an elderly couple as sterile as a stone into a great nation. John the Baptist says, "I tell you; God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." The mistake of these religious leaders was their over-reliance on their ancestors and their under-reliance on God. Because they rely on Abraham they have become arrogant, proud, self-sufficient, and self-righteous. If they relied on God they would repent daily. They would produce the fruit of one whose life is absolutely dependent on God. They would have an ever present awareness of their sin. But, because they don't rely on God, "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."

One is coming who will judge. One is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, meaning that one is coming who will cleanse us both internally and externally. The listeners of John had a choice to make, either they repented by confessing their sins and by producing good fruit, or they would wait for the judgment to come, when the one with the authority to separate the wheat from the tares finally arrived. My friends, we too have the same options. But, let me remind you that for those who believe in Christ, the one who is to come has already come and continues to come to us sacramentally week after week. The one who is to come is a friend and not a stranger. When he arrives we are to celebrate because our salvation is near.

Christmas is the time when we prepare for the coming of the bridegroom, the master of the house. Perhaps the best way to prepare for his return is by becoming aware of the many ways in which he becomes present to us in our daily lives. He is here. He walks with us. He calls us daily to a fully engaged life, to a life of commitment to God and others. He calls us to a lifestyle of service and charity, to a fully repentant life that acknowledges our propensity for evil. A Christian who does not produce fruit is like a farm which does not produce a harvest. Eventually, it becomes useless. May the Christmas child lead us into renewed lives, where Christ is the center and foundation for all we do, all we say, and all we think. Amen!