

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

3:1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' " ⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Prayer of the Day:

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia (Matthew 11:10 cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

Hollywood makes fun of him. He's the haggard bum sitting on the sidewalk in some metropolitan city with the sandwich board that reads "The End Is Near!" He's a lunatic, a naysayer, a negative Nelly, a nobody. Of course, it's not just Hollywood is it? We usually degrade what we really fear, so the crazy guy telling us to watch out might be hitting a bit too close to home. Add another word and well you might have a full-blown situation on your hands. Repent! Its very utterance accuses one of wrong, of sin. Not exactly very open-minded in an open-minded society like ours now is it? And yet, there he is, *In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR!"*

We'll come back to the message in a moment but first, look carefully at the appearance of the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Herald's given messages from kings travel in pomp, emissaries and ambassadors with armed guards commanding the respect of those they speak with as they symbolize the nation for which they speak. *John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.* Okay, so it's not a sandwich board, but it's not far off. His clothes stand in the face of worldly pomp and glory, they intentionally portray poverty. While kings dine on lamb and drink wine by the bowlful, John eats locusts and wild honey.

What's the point? These are the clothes of a prophet of God. This one is unconcerned with the trappings of materialism for the Creator and Sustainer of all things stands with him. Elijah was known for this exact appearance. False prophets would copy it. And the people, they took note. ⁵ *Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were flocking to him,* ⁶ *and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.*

But why? Throw on an itchy robe, a leather belt and eat a bug or two, and watch the crowds come in? No, it was more than that. The clothes are just the start, the wardrobe of a messenger of God. It's the message that was doing the work. It's the message they came to hear. *This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'* His message was simple, "Messiah, the Lord, the promised Shoot from the stump of Jesse, the Savior of all mankind, He is coming and you will want to be ready!" How? *Make straight paths for him!*

When kings would travel often highways were prepared to allow for ease and comfort in their journeys, John's not talking however about some architectural venture, there is no time for that. Jesus is already 29 years old, in a short period of time He will stand beside John on the banks of the Jordan beginning His 3 years of public ministry. No, John's call is different. Instead, he calls for the obstacles of sin to be removed from the heart of man. He calls for repentance. Through the Gospel present in his preaching and in the baptism he offered, the Holy Spirit ushered in the gift of faith which focused not on John but on One greater than him as it yearned for the coming, the revealing of Jesus, the Christ! This faith in Christ acknowledges sin as the cancer it is in the life of man and turns to the only One who can cut it out forever. A fuller quotation of Isaiah 40 reads, *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."* ⁴ *Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.* ⁵ *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 40:3-5)."*

John's calling was as clear as the message he proclaimed. Preparation and repentance are at the forefront of everything he does. But his message wasn't meant for only for the Jews and Gentiles of the Judean countryside some 2000 years ago. As surely as his proclamation prepared Christians for the first coming of Jesus Christ, so also it prepares Christians for His future kingdom as well.

It's here that Matthew gives a snapshot of the message John proclaimed. It would seem that as more and more people gathered, Hollywood stopped making fun of our sandwich board-wearing messenger and decided to pop in for a boost in its own popularity. ⁷ *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* ⁸ *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* ⁹ *And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.* ¹⁰ *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.* ¹¹ *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* ¹² *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

There is a ton here so let's dive right in. John sees them for what they are. Jesus will later refer to them as *whitewashed tombs* (Matthew 23:27), pretty on the outside and rancid on the inside. These were men who thought they had no real need for repentance. Pharisees actively

taught salvation by an outward keeping of the law, empty formalism and hallow traditionalism crowned their actions, while Sadducees were the free-thinkers of the day, they had begun setting aside the truth of God's word for the comforts of their mental pushups as they skirted God's Word to get what they wanted. In the end, they deny the resurrection, angels, even the final judgment.

Oh, but don't treat them like a sandwich board-bearing bum either dear Christian. These are people who had been blessed with the Word, people who had even grown up with it. They prided themselves in that heritage as people who could say they were decedents of Abraham himself. How about you? Where do we find the Pharisee thinking he's good enough without a need for repentance? Is it in the raised eyebrow as you survey neighbor and neighborhood and quietly thank God that we better than all those sinners ()? Perhaps it's in the unexpressed horror that someone would dare say what you were doing was unwise let alone wrong. "How dare they?" might flash across the eye of the mind if not escaping the mouth altogether. Where is the Sadducee? Is it in the college course where the professor tells us to "get with the times and toss aside our religion" and we quickly oblige because we desperately want to fit in? Does it happen as we see the latest trinket Satan dangles in front of the eye promising real happiness if only we depart from the Word of our God a little here and there and not even enough that anyone will get hurt? Children of Adam and Eve really should know that trick already! But hey, in the end, it's okay because our big ol brains can figure out a way around just about anything and God's Word is really more grey than black and white, more suggestion than command, isn't it? John thunders, *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Oh, there is no missing the warning in these words of John the Baptist. But there is something else. Don't miss the one thing that levels the mountains of our transgression and fills in the valleys of our iniquity. Repentance is sorrow over sin but it's also faith, faith in Christ who comes to free us from sin's terrible oppression and free us to produce fruits of faith, fruits of repentance. This faith comes from God alone. He can raise up children from the very stones we so often like to throw at others. He can raise up faith even in the stony hearts of sinners like us. John marveled, ¹¹ *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* ¹² *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* Through faith in Christ, we need not fear ax, winnowing fork or fire. Through His saving work and none of our own, His wheat sits comfortably in the barn.

Okay so calling John the guy sitting on the curb telling us the end is near may be a bit of a stretch. After all that guy may think we need prepare because the aliens are coming soon. That's not John the Baptist. He looked the part of a prophet, the forerunner of Jesus Christ and his message called everyone to get ready for Him. It still does. John's message has proven true from Jesus Birth to Pentecost. Through faith, may we find ourselves prepared for His return. ***"REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR!"***