

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Third Sunday of Advent**  
**December 14, 2025**  
**9:30 AM**

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Theme: Prepare the Way for the Lord: John's Ministry and Preaching

[prayer]

If Advent feels like an inconvenient time to focus on repentance, that is only because our spiritual lives are more informed by culture than the church calendar or, for that matter, Scripture. Our own ideals and longings often take center stage at this time of year rather than the promises of God. But the coming of the Lord is not all sweetness and light. It is an occasion for fear and trembling. And while Jesus descended to earth as an infant in swaddling clothes, he still descended with judgment in his hand. And so he will come again at the end of time.

John's mission was to make people sit up and take notice. If the ax is at the root of the tree, then God's judgment is already prepared, and the period we are currently living in is merely the brief interval before the eschaton arrives. These latter days may feel inscrutably and frustratingly long to us, but they are just a blip in time for God. We need to receive and act on John's message with the urgency it deserves. "John the Baptist is a 'call to worship' in the flesh," writes M. Eugene Boring, "not a benign and cheery 'Good morning,' but a *real* call to worship that shakes the cobwebs off the pews."<sup>1</sup>

Matthew writes John as an insurgent prophet. His manner of speaking and the way he dresses – even what he eats – are not just religious theater; they are symbolic choices. The Prophet Malachi predicted the Lord would send the Prophet Elijah before Him (Mal 4:5). If you know your Old Testament then you know Elijah dressed in a camel's robe with a leather belt around his waist and spent his ministry in the wilderness. Israel was waiting for Elijah to reappear as the sign of God's judgment, but instead here comes John, striding across the landscape in

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring in "Matthew 3:1-12 Reflections." *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume VIII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. Page 159.

haircloth, eating locusts and honey. His behavior is designed to make a scene. It distinguishes him from polite society, because God's judgment ultimately rests on polite society. Eschatological renewal begins in the wilderness, in the forgotten and barren places, among the poor and the sinners and the outcast. John is an insurgent prophet because the God he proclaims is an insurgent God.

But let's be clear: The insurgency John imagined isn't exactly the insurgency God has in mind. If John's message of "turn or burn" feels out of sync with the message of Jesus, you are not wrong. Jesus did not conform to John's expectations for the Messiah; he didn't conform to anyone's expectations! He did not usher in a violent eschatological age. Instead, he came as the complete embodiment of God's judgment perfectly balanced by God's mercy. Jesus's advent is the advent of meekness; of forgiveness and redemption; of a king who leads by serving and suffering and dying. Jesus preaches an insurgency of mercy.

How then should we interpret John's message considering what we know about Jesus?

John argues that the only appropriate way to receive the Lord is through the confession of our sins. "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near!" (v. 3 NRSVUE). John asks us to examine ourselves, to ask ourselves: Are we bearing good fruit, fruit worthy of the kingdom of heaven...or is the ax at our roots?

I think we mistake guilt and shame for repentance. Certainly, a degree of contrition is necessary for true repentance. We should feel sorry for our mistakes. We should try to be better people. But repentance is not about wallowing in guilt and unworthiness, nor is it a box we can check to escape God's judgment. God's judgment comes for all of us, whether we are repentant or not. It comes as a rushing wind and a consuming fire. It burns away the dross; it separates the chaff from the wheat.

Chaff is the outer husk of a kernel of grain. John proclaims that the chaff will be separated from the wheat and then thrown into the fire. One way to interpret this is that the righteous (the wheat) will be separated from the unrighteous (the chaff), and the unrighteous will be condemned and destroyed by God's wrath. But in light of who we know Jesus to be, perhaps a different way to interpret John's message is this: We all have bits of chaff and wheat in us, parts that are righteous

and parts that are unrighteous. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus separates the chaff out of us. Jesus purifies us for the kingdom of heaven. In fact, the Greek word for “clear the threshing floor” is the same Greek word that appears in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt 5:8). In other words, “Blessed are those who allow their chaff to be burned away.”

If we trust that God’s judgment is perfectly balanced by God’s mercy, then we should welcome that rushing wind and purifying fire. If we confess our sins and repent, then we can trust that God’s judgment does not ultimately destroy; instead, it redeems, renews, and grants us new life.

We associate this work of purification with the sacrament of baptism, the washing away of our sin. Ritual washing in dedicated pools of water called *mikvehs* is part of the Jewish preparation for coming before the Lord. For example, after giving birth to Jesus Mary would have been required to immerse herself in a *mikveh* and ritually cleanse herself before she could reenter the worshiping community.

In contrast to this practice of repeated washing, John calls for a once-for-all baptism. This baptism is not just cleansing our spirits so we are fit to be part of the church. This baptism is preparation for the eschaton, for the coming judgment. John explains that water baptism is just the first step. It will be followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (wind and fire), which will do the work of purification that prepares our hearts to see the Lord. Advent was once a period of self-examination and preparation of candidates for baptism, just like the season of Lent, which is why the lectionary emphasizes this story of John calling upon us to change our hearts.

Changed hearts lead to changed behavior. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. It literally means to change our minds. Repentance is not guilt; it is having enough courage and trust in God’s mercy to acknowledge when our beliefs and actions are out of alignment with God’s will and need to be brought back into alignment. To sin is to wander from the way of God. But to repent is to ask God to set our hearts back on his straight and narrow way, the way that leads to His kingdom.

With the gift of the Holy Spirit, sealed upon us at our baptisms, we lay claim to new life in Christ. We have been buried and raised with him, meaning we share in Christ's victory over sin and death. This is God's gracious doing, not our own. John's own name, *Johanon* in Hebrew, points to this grace we are receiving; it means "The LORD is gracious." John's message of repentance before the coming judgment is fundamentally a message of grace. We look to the Lord's coming with fear and trembling, not because we despair at His wrath, but because His kindness, His favor, His mercy are too wonderful to comprehend. How gracious God is to give us His Spirit to purify us, to transform us in Christ's image, and make us fit to receive Him and His kingdom.

John invites us to prepare the way for the Lord by aligning ourselves with Jesus's life and message. This alignment will bear good fruit in our lives and the lives of others, because transformed people transform the world.

Today we will remember and renew our baptismal covenants. As you come to the font, I encourage you to reflect on where your beliefs and behaviors may be out of alignment with the will of God. Ask God to send His Spirit anew into your life and burn away the chaff. "Blessed are those who allow their chaff to be burned away, for they will see God."

Let us pray:

*Lord, forgive us, wash us, fill us. We offer ourselves to you and renew once more the promise made at our baptism. We confess you, Jesus, as our Savior and our Lord. Help us to follow you today and honor you in all that we do. Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a prayer by Adam Hamilton in *Prepare the Way for the Lord: Advent and the Message of John the Baptist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022). Page 101.