

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This 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.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do 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. Even 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.

“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. His 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.”

“At this moment our society is becoming increasingly fractured.” That’s the opening of a reflection for the First Sunday of Advent written by Bishop Mark Strange, the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. “Many of us are frightened,” he wrote. “Many of us are alone. Many of us have lost trust in our national and local institutions. We worry for our friends and family. We are frightened for the environment. We are increasingly disconnected from those around us.”

Seems that we are not alone in feeling these anxieties. Bishop Strange went on to point out that throughout Advent, we will hear stories, reflections and prayers that convey some of the ways that the church responds to these anxieties to inspire us to be the people God yearns for us to be.

People come to the church, to *this* church, seeking relief for large scale situations and for personal issues. And God provides a sense of wholeness, even if seekers do not find cures. People come for answers, even if many of the answers are new questions. They come for strength, even if the strength is mostly companionship through their weakness.

For some, these can seem like partial gifts, consolation gifts, something somehow less than what they requested. And when that

feels disappointing, people often go shopping for a church they imagine will give them what they think they want.

Odd thing about grief, suffering and hardship: If we approach our search like consumers, we're *likely* to be dissatisfied, despite having taken the difficult first steps of walking into the wilderness of health issues, isolation or broken relationships; whatever the suffering is.

God never *gives* us suffering and frequently meets us in wild places to offer wholeness, fresh questions and companions along our way. And if people can persevere, at some point, success means that the church is no longer *for* them. Instead, *they* are for the *church*. They come to church to be filled with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of going back into the world to pour out the Holy Spirit – to turn again, that is, to serve Christ in others.

This morning, as the world outside darkens, the light inside grows a little brighter. Last week, the single candle called “Hope” stood burning alone. Now the candle called “Peace” shares its light and we hear a voice calling from one of those wild places. John the Baptizer speaks from the wilderness; a place of darkness, danger and death.

The wilderness where John has suddenly appeared is not at all like the lush evergreen forests of the North Cascades. The Judean desert is harsh, hilly and desolate. That desert is still beyond the fringes of villages and towns, home mostly to Bedouins and their herds of camels and goats. For the ancients, it was a place where spiritual seekers went to confront inner demons and beasts, to strip off non-essential baggage, to purify the body, mind and soul.

Seeking relief or healing, looking for answers or strength to face adversity, we meet John the Baptizer in the desert. Here, we can wash away what is unnecessary and hear John's counsel. The remainder of what we need will come as we turn to Christ, that is to say, as we repent.

Sometimes, repentance involves correcting our mistakes. And yet, the deeper action has less to do with fixing bad behavior and more to do with watching for Christ, in our lives and in each other. The fruit of repentance comes through hearts opened to people that we encounter who are suffering in ways that we have suffered. The fruit of repentance

comes through our presence more than our actions or words as we move beside people while Christ moves toward and through us.

John's voice calls from the purifying desert – a cry from his heart to all hearts – an invitation to take the pivotal step at the center of repentance. His invitation is to loosen our grasp on what we have brought into the wilderness; to open our hands wide enough to receive what God has for us. John inspires us to let aspects of life that no longer serve us drop away so that we can take in renewed life that will serve others. That's what it means to "repent."

Imagine having an insight, a *purpose*, conceived in the darkness of our own suffering. While a wound still bleeds, while the pain is still fresh, we need the support of people willing simply to be with us in the darkness of uncertainty and unknowing. With persistence and patience, our hearts begin to soften and unclench enough to allow God to wash our wounds with grace until our anxiety, our afflictions or conflicts no longer feel quite so overwhelming.

We begin to live in recovery from an addiction; we learn to carry grief into the new world of a life without a loved one; we start making peace with the realities of an aging or compromised body. We discover that the ache doesn't leave; that the experience has, instead, changed us and the world we live in. And with that realization comes something fragile and unprotected, waiting to be nourished and developed.

The potential for purpose in our suffering. God provides meaning for the experiences we bring into the darkness and grants access to an overwhelming flow of love; love so complete, massive and powerful that we actually can't imagine it or contain it, in part, because it isn't only for us.

We can choose to leave that potential purpose unexplored; to abandon the meaning in the seed that God planted within us. We are free to return to our addictions or choose to embrace fear or grief or loss here in the wilderness. Or there is another choice.

Theologian and storyteller Dr. Jack Shea wrote: "Feeling sorry, acknowledging guilt, and prolonging regret may be components of the human condition, but they are not what Jesus means by repentance. Repentance is the response to grace that overcomes the past and opens out to a new future. Repentance distinguishes Christian life as

one of struggle and conversion and pervades it, not with remorse, but with hope. The message of Jesus is not 'Repent,' but 'Repent for the Kingdom of God is near'."

In that light, hear the voice of John saying, "Come back to what God has planted in your errors, in your misunderstanding, in your suffering! Come, fill yourself with God's heaven until you are filled to overflowing so that others can be washed with it."

That's the fruit worthy of repentance!

Whenever we return to Christ, fire *does* come. But that fire is neither hellfire nor wildfire. It is a controlled burn. All that you and I, and we together, all that God created us to be and to give to the world – *that's* the wheat. All the love that was meant to be yours and mine and ours, and all creation's – *that's* the wheat.

Anything that distracts us from participating in that reality; anything that we choose to do instead or that we decide *not* to do instead – *that's* the chaff that the Spirit will burn away with unquenchable fire.

Whenever we turn our eyes toward coming back Christward – when we acknowledge that we are off purpose or are somehow choking the flow of God's love – God is willing to burn away whatever distracted us. Think of the light of a fire like that and you'll get a sense of why we hear this Gospel on the day we light the candle named for God's Peace.

Rather than showing up like the Pharisees and Sadducees only because our ancestors did or just to avoid going to hell or out of unmindful habit, we can hope instead to leave the wilderness bearing fruit worthy of repentance to give to a world starving for peace.

Our own struggles teach us, if we will let them, how to see the struggles of others. Our partial wholeness has cracks and crevices, openings through which we can offer compassion, spoken or unspoken. Every time we return to the wilderness, God burns more chaff away so that more light shines. In time, God sanctifies and blesses our missteps, our wounds and scars, making us symbols and carriers of heaven.

God shines through our brokenness with the light of hope and peace so that others can see and be nourished until they, too, come seeking to be filled to overflowing with the kingdom of God.

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