

December 7, 2025—The Second Sunday of Advent
The Rev. James Wyatt

Repent

What do you think of when you hear the word “repent”? For me, growing up not going to church, the only place I encountered that word for a long time was in comics or cartoons where some crazy person would be holding a sign on a street corner saying “Repent! The end is near!” or something like that. Which, I guess, is not too far off from how John the Baptist appears here in the Gospel of Matthew. But I’ve been wondering, again, about that word, wondering how well we really understand John’s message, and wondering about what Jesus meant when he picked up that message and repeated it after John was arrested. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

So the Greek word used in the Gospel of Matthew, μετανοεῖτε, literally means “change your mind.” The prefix “meta-” can mean “after,” so there’s some connotation of like having second thoughts, looking back on your decision or your plan and rethinking it. In fact, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word is most often used of God, when God relents from punishment, decides not to carry out the disaster that God had planned. So, for example, when the prophet Jonah finally makes his way to Nineveh and warns them of God’s wrath, and all the people put on sackcloth and sit in ashes and fast and pray for God’s mercy, God changes God’s mind—God relents, because the people repented.

And that seems to be the heart of John the Baptist’s message as well. Repentance, to John, seems to mean wearing a scratchy hair shirt and eating locusts and honey, living a life of self-denial and humility in the hope of escaping from divine punishment. When the Pharisees and Sadducees come in answer to his call to repentance, he asks them, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” When he says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” he seems to be saying, it’s time to clean up your act, because judgment is at hand and if we’re not careful God’s wrath will be poured out on us, even more than it already is. Indeed, I think it’s fair to say that John is angry—angry at the state of the world, angry at the oppression of Rome, their ongoing occupation of Judaea, their taxation, their savage repression of dissent, their defiling presence in God’s holy land—John seems pretty angry, and he seems to be preaching about a very angry God. “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.” John is fed up. John sees how messed up the world is and knows that it can’t go on like this. We need a change, we need a whole new way of doing things. We need to repent.

According to Matthew, at least, John also knew that he wasn’t the One. “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” he says, but “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” He’s pointing to Jesus, of course, and in a couple of weeks, we’ll hear the story of Jesus coming to John to be baptized. The thing is, I’m not sure I recognize the Jesus he’s pointing to. “I am not worthy to carry his sandals,” John says. “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.” I mean, if I ask you to name a Biblical figure depicted holding a pitchfork, which is basically what a winnowing fork is, would Jesus be the one who comes to mind?

“He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” “He shall rescue the poor—and crush the oppressor.” Our reading from Isaiah and our Psalm this morning also have hints of this idea that the king who is coming is coming in wrath, to establish righteousness on earth through violence, waging war on the wicked and the oppressor.

And that is not what Jesus did. “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” John says—but that powerful one was born as a helpless refugee, had no place to lay his head, and rode into Jerusalem on a donkey’s back. “I am not worthy to carry his sandals,” John says—but Jesus knelt to wash his disciples’ feet. This powerful, wrathful Messiah that

John gave such dire warnings about took little children into his arms and blessed them and said that God's kin-dom belongs to those who are servants, not kings.

Given all that, when Jesus picks up his proclamation—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."—it's the same words, the same sense of urgency. But in practice, I think it's a very different message. To Jesus, the kingdom of heaven coming near is not a threat, it's a gift, an opportunity, an invitation. It's a wedding feast to which everyone is invited, a party with plenty of eating and drinking, much more focused on celebrating the return of the sinners than on punishing them. And so repentance is not about avoiding the divine wrath but about turning toward God's love and mercy. And the kingdom of God drawing near is about tasting and seeing those times and places where the peaceable kingdom described so vividly in Isaiah begins to bloom in the world, the kingdom where wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion and fatling all live together in peace, and a little child shall lead them, and "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

There is a sense of abundance, of lush, rich blessing, that runs through all our readings this morning, in stark contrast to the words of violence and fire. "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord," Isaiah says, "as the waters cover the sea." Our Psalm says the king "shall come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth. In his time shall the righteous flourish; there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more." And Paul in Romans prays that we might be filled "with all joy and peace in believing, so that [we] may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." And even John, in all his righteous anger, hopes that we will "bear fruit worthy of repentance."

I wonder what that might look like. If we repent—if we change our hearts and our minds to turn toward God's love and mercy, to welcome the kin-dom of heaven blossoming among us, to celebrate the gathering of God's beloved people—then what abundant fruit might we bear? If we are filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, how might that change us and the way we live our lives? How might we live into Isaiah's vision of peace among all creatures? If we are watered with the life-giving rain of the kin-dom of heaven, how might we flourish? How might peace abound in us? And if God fills us with all joy and peace in our believing, and we abound in hope, how might we live out that hope? How might we face life differently, even face death differently, if we are full of that hope?

I think all of us, at our very best, live into that beautiful vision of the abundance of God's love. We help one another, "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed [us]." We take care of the neediest and the most vulnerable in our community. We nurture the bonds of community in a world that would very much like to tear us apart. We practice love and hospitality and patience and kindness and gentleness in a world that expects us to be hard and mean and to look out for number one. At our very best, we are ushering the kin-dom of God into being right here in our midst.

And I think all of us, the rest of the time, need a reminder here and there, to turn back to God, to repent, to re-orient, and remember to be open to the presence of the Holy Spirit. May this Advent be that reminder for you. May your eyes be open to the nearness of the kin-dom of heaven, the abundance of peace and joy around you, and the hope God offers us all—hope for a world transformed. Amen.