

2Advent, Matthew 3:1-12  
Rev. Kimberly Glenn  
December 7, 2025

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)**

One day recently, a man sat down with a friend one day to find out more about how his friend had developed his musical skill. He knew his friend was a virtual musical genius. His friend told him that it was true that he was indeed a musical prodigy. He never talked about himself much but this time he said that at three he had composed an opera, at four he wrote a minuet, and at five he had written a complete symphony. Then at 5:30 he went downstairs and fixed a cup of tea.

The point of that little humorous story is that we make assumptions when we don't know the whole story. It is easy to do that when we read the gospels or any part of the New Testament. We think of the Old Testament as entirely separate from the New Testament because in so many ways it is very different. Oftentimes we hear people refer to the God of the Old Testament as if that God is a completely different God from the one we come to know through Jesus in the New Testament. When I was ordained, or whenever any priest is ordained, we priests make a vow to preach the gospels. Consequently we preach a whole lot less often on the Old Testament texts or the Psalms or even the letters that make up the majority of the New Testament. But those texts are the very foundation of what we read in the gospels. The gospels echo images and patterns that we see throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

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For example, look at the opening of the gospel text for today. It begins with a reference to the Prophet Isaiah. Matthew, who wrote this gospel, knew as so many of the people in his audience knew the stories from Hebrew scripture and tradition. The Jewish religious leaders impressed on the families in their synagogues and communities the importance of adhering to the spiritual teachings and commandments. God had made it clear to them from the time of the Exodus from Egypt that they were to write these things on their hearts and post them on their doorways. They taught the stories, repeated them at meals, and even wore them in small leather boxes called phylacteries on their foreheads. These were not incidental actions—they describe a unique lifestyle of continual remembering.

So when Matthew tells the story of John the Baptist the description of John's appearance and his message and temperament are an echo of the prophet Elijah. In the Hebrew scriptures, prophets were those courageous souls who spoke God's truth when kings and religious leaders most needed to hear it. Elijah was the first of the classical line of prophets who openly and sometimes loudly criticized religious and government leaders when they went astray. God sent warnings to the leaders through the prophets.

John wore odd and uncomfortable clothing, like Elijah. His message was blunt and his tone was harsh. It is pretty clear in this text that Matthew believed that John the Baptist was the return of the prophet Elijah. Jesus even says that in a later chapter in Matthew. In chapter 11 Jesus says, "If you are willing to accept it, he is

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Elijah who was to come.” (MT 11:14) Jesus was saying that John was that person of whom Isaiah spoke when he said there would be the voice crying in the wilderness. Jesus and Matthew believed that John was the one who would pave the way for the Messiah. Matthew knew what the last verse of the last book of the Hebrew Bible says. In the Book of Malachi the very last verse says, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” ( Malachi 4:5–6 ) Jesus knew and Matthew knew that John the Baptist was the sign that the time of the Lord was upon them. We are in it, too, my friends, and now if only we can turn people’s hearts once again to the Lord.

John the Baptist preached repentance. I’m not sure that all the people gathered at the river with John really knew what repentance meant. Maybe that is why he referred to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a brood of vipers. Maybe they had slithered out to the desert to see him out of curiosity rather than a desire to change. Maybe he knew that true repentance could not take hold until a person humbled themselves. John instinctively knew true repentance required that they acknowledge their sins of exclusion and judgment, ‘fess up to their sins of greed and neglect of the widows and orphans in order to make a turn toward what was right. True repentance means a commitment to follow God’s will and not one’s own will.

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How many of us truly commit to God's will? Are we like a brood of vipers, too? Maybe, but I don't think so. I do think that there are a lot of people in our world, though, who could be described that way; people who are more interested in their own wealth and prestige, their own security; people who tend to judge and divide instead of include; people who doubt that God is real and really cares for us.

Speaking of division, you might wonder why John the Baptist is encouraging the division of wheat and chaff in this gospel reading. Is that the same as dividing sheep and goats? The Messiah is coming after me. "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 thought that language suggested division and I don't believe that God and Jesus want us to be divided or to judge each other. I was troubled by those words so I dug into discovering what exactly that process is all about. What I discovered was a very pleasant surprise.

From a scholar named Matthew Meyer Bolton I learned that every grain of wheat has a husk. The husk is what is collectively known as "chaff." Farmers use the wind to separate the two parts - the nutritious wheat grain and its throw-away husk. John was *not* talking about separating good grain from bad grain or implying that the good Jews would be separated from the bad Jews. The goal was to remove the parts that got in the way of what God can use. The wind and the fire remove the "husks" of anxiety, self-absorption, apathy or greed that can make us less generous or less just, less respectful of others. To quote Meyer Bolton,

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“Alexander Solzhenitsyn has it right: there is a line between good and evil but it doesn’t run between groups; it runs through the heart of each person.” Don’t we all need to be liberated from our husks? Once liberated from whatever is holding us back, we can be restored to perfect relationship with our creator.

John the Baptist reminds us that the patterns and pathways of our lives today rest upon the patterns and pathways that our ancestors laid as a foundation for us. God was a part of their lives and God continues to be a part of ours. When John the Baptist turns our attention to God during Advent, we consider again the importance of our commitment to God. Let John the Baptist make our paths straight so that we do not get lost on the way to the Christmas manger in Bethlehem.