

We have been in a series in the gospel of Matthew. Last week we finished up all of what Matthew has to say about Jesus' birth to childhood and we looked at the violent narrative of Jesus' family on the run from an evil tyrant—Herod—who was carrying out an infanticide. And it is out of this violent, chaotic world Matthew transitions the story 30 years later and in Matthew 3, the text we are going to look at today, Jesus will have a path paved before him toward public ministry.

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Matthew 3:1-3)

"In those days..."

It has been around 30 or so years since chapter 2. Now, if you remember back to last week Mark shared the story of the violence that erupted by the hands of King Herod who senselessly murders all of the firstborns in the nation in a crazed effort to protect his power and throne. It is from the midst of despair, agony, and oppression that we enter into our story today.

One of the great traditions the Jewish people have passed along from an earlier time is that of the oral tradition, and it oozes out of the text here in this line, "in those days." In which days? In the days when God's voice was silent. There was a 400-year silence where Israel was laboring under a prophetic pregnancy; they were promised God will speak, but for whatever reason for the past 400 years where we pick up the story, God is silent; the days of pain, despair, and silence.

The refrain across the country must have been, "When will God speak? When will we hear from him again?" In the days of silence, there comes a voice; with hopeful tears welling up and rolling down their cheeks, there comes a voice. And then, out of this despair and silence a voice of one preaching in the wilderness cries out. This was a pivotal moment in Israel's history. Having lacked a prophetic voice for 400 years, John's arrival in the manner of Elijah was a welcome and frightful sight.

But this voice doesn't merely speak up, there is something unique about this voice. "A voice of one calling in the wilderness..." The wilderness has a fascinating history with the people of Israel. But to fully grasp its significance we have to spend a short time understanding what Matthew is doing here in the text. Matthew is doing more than giving us a geography lesson. To speak of the wilderness is to recall Israel's time in the wilderness following

the exodus, and to catch up hopes for a new act of deliverance which would commence in the wilderness.

Matthew is not merely documenting historical facts of Jesus' life, although this is our assumption as well, but he is constructing a narrative which has layers of meaning and significance. And one of those layers is the re-telling of a new exodus.

He is intentional in this by demonstrating that Jesus is a new Moses. So like Moses, Jesus comes up out of Egypt. He passes through the waters in baptism (like Moses and the Red Sea). He will enter the wilderness (for 40 days, not years). He then goes up on a mountain to deliver a teaching (Mt. Sinai vs. Sermon on the Mount). But Jesus is the greater Moses—delivering his people from slavery, giving new divine teaching, saving from sin, and initiating new covenant relationships.

Matthew is deliberately illustrating Jesus as the greater Moses because it is Jesus who will liberate his people from underneath the boot of Rome, from systemic oppression, and from the overwhelming tyranny of sin. You see, it is in the days of silence that a distant voice in the wilderness is speaking of hope. And this hope is the rule and reign of the Kingdom of God manifesting itself right here and right now!

"This is the one who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (v. 3)

In verse 3 we get a more clear picture of who the man John the Baptist was. Matthew is tapping into the prophetic history of Israel. They have been in this period of silence. But this quote is no mere recalling of the prophetic history. Much like what we see happening in Matthew 3, the 400-year break of God's voice is broken by John; the text Matthew takes up from Isaiah 40 is at the heels of a 160-year gap between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40. In that gap, the destruction of the entire Jerusalem establishment—city, dynasty, temple—is carried out. The complete infrastructure of that social and theological entity is destroyed.

What we read in Isaiah 40 is the hopeful words of God breaking the silence after the entirety of the Israelite identity—meaning, purpose and hope—had been decimated. So it is in this despair that a voice cries out, *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every*

valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 40:1-5).

But what does this "prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him," actually mean? Isaiah here is authorizing the construction of a highway from Babylon back to Jerusalem. It was in Babylon that the people of God were taken into exile. Babylon was representative of the silence and brokenness of their people. The image of a highway is that they were built in the ancient world primarily for processional events, when rulers and gods could parade in victory.

This metaphor that Matthew uses is a powerful image of the coming work of Jesus. In all four gospels, Isaiah is quoted. John the Baptist reiterates this image from Isaiah so that the ministry of Jesus is presented as good news for dislocated people in the ancient world. The ministry of Jesus is a glad and public home-coming for all those alienated and dislocated.

But this does beg the questions: What is the comfort? What is the message of this figure, this prophet John the Baptist? What is he bringing to bear that is the hopeful and long anticipated message? The message of John in verse 2 clearly picks up this royal metaphor that the Gospel (meaning "good news") is about the arrival of a King that would liberate his people. The central message of John the Baptist, and what I think you can boil down all of Jesus' teaching into, is found right here in 3:2, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**"

Before we talk about this, we have to do some work on a few of the words because here is the problem that we face as 21st century people coming to the biblical text: We enter the story half-way through and we forget that we need to use words the way that the biblical authors used words and not import and project our own understanding onto the text. And John's sermon brings two words that I think we need to do some work on before we can understand the message: "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," and *metanoia*—"think differently afterwards."

The problem is, when we read this phrase, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," we come half-way through the story and bring all sorts of baggage with us about this phrase "repent."

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John's message is one of repentance. It is the central message that he brings, which is in line with the prophetic tradition. We get all bent out of shape over this word repentance because the phrase is associated with the guy outside the stadium with the picket sign and the bullhorn, crying out for repentance. But this isn't the message of John. The word itself is a construction of two different Greek words: *meta*—to change, as in metamorphosis, and *noia*—thinking, knowledge, worldview.

The concept of repentance is a familiar one for those who have been around church. But, often our understanding comes short. Simply, repentance is the complete re-ordering and re-orientation of our beings around something different. Repentance comes through the encounter of God, who radically alters our orientation to the world around us. Repentance has all sorts of nuance, but at an etymological level, the words means to "think different afterwards." It is to encounter God and then reorient your thinking around that reality.

We have to do the same type of work on this word kingdom. "Repent, for the **kingdom** of heaven has come near." *Basileia*—"Kingdom, the realm in which a king rules."

Our tendency is to import our own understanding on the word and we tend to make this word into a cute pithy sort of cliché. But this word, particularly in the 1st century world, is pregnant with subversion. As we enter this story, the original hearers of John's message of the Kingdom had an entire worldview wrapped up in their theology. It was that God was already King. And it is similar to what we understand our world to be now.

Just like for us, the Jews as well lived in a world that was riddled with violence, riddled with brokenness. As we saw last week, Herod was effectively carrying out infanticide to protect his own political power. But for the Jews, there was coming a time when all this brokenness would be restored. It is what we see in Genesis 1 and 2—God's effective rule, where he dwells with his people in harmony and shalom.

By Genesis 3, this is fractured by sin, death, brokenness, pain and violence. This is what the 1st century world would call the "Present Age"—sin, death, satan. But there was also another "age" in the 1st century worldview; it was the "Age to Come"—end to the exile, renew the covenant, deal with sin, God would dwell with his people, resurrection.

The phrase they would use to describe the "age to come" would be the term "Kingdom of Heaven." His language of "kingdom" is difficult for us because we don't use or understand it much, but the Greek word for Kingdom is the word, *basileia*.

Kingdom of God: The range of God's effective will, where what God wants done is done. This hope—that one day God will deal with all of the nonsense of the present age will be dealt with. Sin, death, disease, wildfires, cancer, violence, senseless murder, everything will be dealt with! And so this is the hope of the 1st century Jewish world, that one day this kingdom would arrive, God would be placed on the throne, and his will would be implemented.

This is the hope, and after 400 years of prophetic silence John bursts on the scene and says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Or better put, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." "...is at hand." or "...has come near." This is important. John announces that the Kingdom of Heaven Is. At. Hand. It is

not some sort of future thing off in the distance. It is no longer a future reality, but it is in the arrival of Jesus that the Kingdom has arrived!

The Greek word used here is in the perfect indicative tense, which carries a feeling of its already arrival. The kingdom of heaven is here, right now, in the here and now. Most of us think the role of Jesus was to come to establish some sort of religion, or church, etc. But no, Jesus came to inaugurate the arrival of the Kingdom. And John is paving the way for the arrival of this new king. That sort of life is on offer **now**.

There is a different way to be human that falls under the kingship and authority of Jesus as the one who rules all of the universe. So the way you think about sex, the way you think about money, the way you think about politics, the way you think about business, art, parenting, being a student; everything is radically re-organized around the presence of the Kingdom of God. Here. And. Now. You used to believe all these different things, but when we enter the Kingdom of God, we organize everything around that reality.

This sort of kingdom talk subverts any other kingdom we adhere to because the reality is that our hearts are entangled in all sorts of kingdoms, seeking life and hope from each. But you are now subjects of a new kingdom, a new order. No longer the kingdoms of individualism, or success, or money, or whatever it may be.

This news of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven is about the here and now. We tend to make this about some sort of disembodied otherly existence, but the hope of the 1st century was about the Kingdom of Heaven crashing into earth in the here-and-now.

NT Wright, New Testament scholar, whose work has focused significantly on the 1st century worldview of hope, says this in his book entitled, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, "The phrase 'kingdom of heaven' does not refer to a place, called 'heaven,' where God's people go after death. It refers to the rule of heaven, that is, of God, being brought to bear in the present world. Thy kingdom come, said Jesus, thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Jesus' contemporaries knew that the creator God intended to bring justice and peace to his world here and now. The question was, how, when and through whom."

So John rolls onto the scene and says, that time is now, and the person is through Jesus. John is inviting you to live in this reality now; not that you escape to heaven, but that you enter the way of life that Jesus offers to bring heaven here and now.

The availability of the Kingdom here and now has all sorts of implications for us today. "Repent, for the kingdom of electricity is at hand." So yes, repentance does require a seeking forgiveness, but it isn't some sort of ethereal random seeking of forgiveness.

It becomes easy for us to overlook the importance of this message. We have a tendency to over-spiritualize this idea of the

repentance and the kingdom of God. But John and Jesus are not speaking about some sort of spiritual corner of your heart. No, they are saying re-think and re-orient your entire being around a new reality, because it is at hand! Because the rule and reign of heaven and God has come and it is in the form of Jesus.

Philosopher and author Dallas Willard offers a brilliant illustration of repentance in his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*. Willard shares about his childhood in the 1930s in rural Missouri prior to electricity. Life was governed by wood heat, kerosene lamps, and washing cloths by hand. But once electricity arrived into town, they had the opportunity for a drastically different life, because the power of electricity was "at hand."

But in order to step into this reality they had to "repent" (or think differently in light of a new reality) about how life would now be done. They had to turn from their lanterns, believe and trust that a switch would now turn on a light, a furnace would now heat the house, and a machine could wash their clothes.

Not everyone accepted this new-found "power." No, some resigned to continue their ways of life. We are most familiar with the Amish communities who never "repented" of candlelight. They refuse to "enter the kingdom of electricity." Indeed, when power arrived in the town the message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of electricity is at hand." It takes a changing of mind, a changing of paradigm about life to accept a new way.

And this is precisely what John the Baptist is doing. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Change your thinking. Change your worldview. Change the entire orientation of your life. You have a new organizing principle in your life because the Kingdom of heaven is here!

This is the first opportunity offered by John here. He comes and preaches this opportunity that the offer for the reality of the kingdom in the here-and-now is present and is available today. Jesus in John 10:10 says that he has come to bring life and life to the fullest. This full life is on offer now. But this isn't the only option that John portrays.

John's call to his people is a costly one. It refers not to a regular turning from a specific act but to a once-for-all repentance, the kind of turning from an old way of life to a new. True repentance is costly; it demands your entire life. And if we are honest, nominalism tends to be the western church's drug of choice.

More often than not we would rather the demands of the kingdom sanctify our standard and way of living rather than the other way around. We would rather take the Gospel and the kingdom of heaven and turn it into a commodity to add onto our life. But, the Gospel is going to demand everything about you. And we see John delivering this message because look at how he handles those who came trying to commoditize the Gospel.

Notice who it is that is coming out to John—"Jerusalem and all of Judea and the whole region of the Jordan..." The offer was a

broad call to anyone who would come to be baptized and find repentance to enter this Kingdom way of living here and now. But John brings a harsh critique to the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

"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? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. 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.'" (verses 7-10)

John immediately rebukes the religious leaders, calling them a "brood of vipers!" Now, right out of the gate this is brutal language! Remember, the Pharisees and Sadducees are connected to the Genesis narrative. It was the story for the Jews. And of course, in that Genesis 1,2,3 story, it is a serpent who deceives Adam and Eve and is representative of Satan. A brood simply means the children of the devil. So quite literally John is looking at the religious establishment, the power of the day, and says, "You are sons of Satan!"

The Pharisees were a religious group who believed that they could bring about the Kingdom of Heaven in the Age to Come through obedience to the Law. They had co-opted the story of the in-breaking Kingdom of God for their own power. They believed their religious resumé was going to be enough. Their moralism was centered around the accumulation of their own power and social status. For some of us, we view the Gospel as a means to another end. The Sadducees were a religious group that held significant political power. They were in cahoots with the Roman Empire and ultimately believed that a political kingdom was what Jesus was after.

The reason for the strong critique of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees was both groups commodified the Gospel for their own purposes. And John warns of the day that is coming for those who do not immerse life into the reality of the Kingdom of God here and now.

"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." (v. 10)

For those who refuse to enter the Kingdom, destruction is coming. A heart that is bent away from the ways of the Kingdom will ultimately destroy itself. Because, if a heart is not transformed by the renewing baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, then it will be bent toward things other than eternal, which John here preaches will ultimately be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made. Good things as well as bad, you know, are caught by a kind of

infection. If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. They are not a sort of prize which God could, if He chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry. Once a man is united to God, how could he not live forever? Once a man is separated from God, what can he do but wither and die?" -- CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.

What CS Lewis and what John the Baptist are getting at here is that a heart that has chosen to repent and enter into the Kingdom kind of life is catching the infection, or as Jesus said, the small amount of yeast is leavening the entire dough. **But** on the other hand, the heart that refuses is slowly withering away.

The invitation is to immerse ourselves into this story, to be baptized into the waters that cleanse us. They symbolize our renewal, a process that Jesus himself walks before us because the result is the accumulation of a thousand decisions we make daily. Has the Spirit transformed our hearts into the kind of people that live into the reality of the Kingdom of God? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Repent, not just that one time at summer camp years ago, but repent daily, drawing and mingling your heart with the things of Jesus on a daily basis so that the Kingdom life becomes the outpouring of your very life.

John says, begin here with baptism. Enter and immerse yourself into this reality, right here and right now. Because the other option is to disconnect from the fountain of life. The other option is to continue to commodify the Gospel for your own purposes, and refuse to place this Kingdom way at the center of everything in your life and wither and die. Because the ax is already laid at the root of the tree.

The text illustrates two options: ***"Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River"...*** ***"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."*** (verses 6, 10).

The challenge before us all this morning is to hear the message of a voice in the wilderness. There is a new way to being human and it is an offer for us all. The Kingdom of God is at hand; it is available to all that walk into that reality, aligning their life into the way of the Kingdom. But to enter this reality we must repent. We must turn, recognize the madness of living with ourselves at the center, and enter a new way to be human.

So, may you recognize the availability of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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