

Sermon – December 4, 2022
“Bear fruit worthy of repentance”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill us with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning. Are we filled with anticipation yet for the coming one? The day we celebrate the arrival of the Christ child is not far away. People, get ready, as our anticipation turns into the arrival of the day when we exchange gifts because of the joy of the arrival of the coming one as a child. This morning, we are looking beyond the arrival of Christ as a child to the anticipation of the coming one to Israel. Let me remind us this morning of how the prophet Malachi, that last voice of the prophets in the Old Testament, closes the Old Testament with these words from God. This is from Malachi 4:5-6, “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.” These words close the Old Testament. The people of God, the Jewish people, have waited for hundreds of years for the coming of the prophet Elijah and the turning of the hearts of parents to their children and children to their parents. No prophet had arisen in Israel since

Malachi and the word of the LORD was rare in those days. People heard these words read in their synagogues and in response they looked for the coming of another prophet.

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, the place where the people of God began to experience God after their escape from Egypt. Here in the same area where the prophet Elijah once spoke the words of God to the people comes a new voice, a voice crying out in the wilderness to the people who are hungry for a word from God and anticipating a prophet. John's clothing helps us grasp who he is. His garment is made of camel hair. Camel hair is a rough outer garment for common people. It is so thick that it is almost a water proof garment. Around John's waist is a belt of leather that also connects him to the prophet Elijah. One of the ancient voices of the church, Theodore of Mopsuestia, pointed out that camels have both clean and unclean attributes. They chew cud as clean animals do, but do not have a cloven hoof which makes them unclean. Theodore saw in the camel hair garment John wore both the Jewish people represented by the clean aspects of the camel and the Gentiles represented by the unclean aspects. John, with his camel hair outer garment, is a picture of a voice crying out with a message not just to Jews but to all people.ⁱ And this hairy outer garment is similar to the garment that Elijah once wore and would remind those who saw John of a connection to Elijah.

John's connections to Elijah continue, next seen in Matthew's description of the food John eats: locust and wild honey. According to one source, locusts were eaten either boiled in salt water or dried and ground into flour as a source of protein. They are an insect that is considered clean under the Hebrew food laws and are an abundant food of the wilderness. I will tell you that the quick search I did for locust flour on Amazon did not find any, so we will not be having locust bread for Communion or locust biscuits for dinner. The idea of wild honey has always been an issue for me as I understand honey is honey and could not figure out what wild honey might be. Is it unprocessed, made by wild bees with tattoos? I found another of the ancient voices of the church, Origen, describing wild honey as that which is found in the wild. Because the honey is not planned for or expected, it is a gift and when eaten, brings delight to the heart.ⁱⁱ The food that John eats would also have been food that Elijah enjoyed when he lived in the wilderness of this area.

John's message is also a connection to Elijah for he is a voice crying out in the wilderness, calling people to repent and, through their repentance, preparing the way for a coming one. Key in John's message are his words, "the kingdom of heaven has come near."ⁱⁱⁱ

The verb tense of this phrase does not point to a future event yet to occur, but points to an event that has happened and is ongoing. The phrase states the kingdom of heaven has come near, not will be coming, or will come someday. As John cries out in the wilderness, he tells us the kingdom of heaven has already come near. Jesus will give the same message when he teaches in the synagogues and towns of Galilee. The kingdom of heaven has come near. When Jesus sends out his disciples to share on their missionary journeys in Israel, he gives them this same message: the kingdom of heaven has come near. It is the same message that we end our times of worship with when we are sent out to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are to be those who are out in the world proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of heaven is not a future event, but has come near in Jesus Christ and we are those living in this in-breaking kingdom. The arrival of the kingdom of heaven is good news for all who hear it, repent, turn to Jesus, and enter the kingdom of heaven. We can say with the early church, "Christ has come" and "Come, Lord Jesus, come." We are in the season of anticipation of the coming of the Christ child as we once again recall, remember, and relive the coming near of the kingdom of heaven and the arrival of Jesus Christ as a child in the flesh. Yet even as we recall Jesus coming as a child, we are able to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near and is open to all who will believe.

John's message in the wilderness is to Jewish people. He is calling them to repentance to make a way for the coming of the Lord. Those who are responding to John's message are Jews. John is baptizing Jews, those who have God's Law, a covenant with God. They are the people who worship God in the temple in Jerusalem. John's baptism of Jews speaks to the need for renewal of the temple system and God's action to bring about something new once again out of the wilderness. And the people come to John to hear him, confessing their sins as they are baptized. So great is the response of the people from Jerusalem, the land along the Jordan, and Judea, that both Sadducees and Pharisees come to see what is happening. Of all who come in response to this voice in the wilderness, John's message to this group, those who are in the know about God, who know the Law and seek to be righteous through the Law, is the most pointed. John calls them a brood of vipers and asks them who warned them to flee the wrath of God. The Sadducees and Pharisees did not come to repent, as they come thinking that they need no repentance. Jesus will pick up this same response to them as he interacts with them during his teaching in Israel and will also call them a brood of vipers.

John makes it very clear that he is only a herald of the one to come. He tells the crowds he is not worthy to carry the sandal of this coming one. Carrying another's sandal is an act that the lowest servant would do for a master. John sees himself and his baptism for repentance as a call to another who will do greater things for God's people. He seeks only to point to Jesus' coming and assure those who are responding that a greater one is coming, and in fact is here.

Notice the message John has for the religious leaders and for the people of Israel. He says the axe is at the root of the tree. An axe at the root of a tree is not a symbol of pruning to bring forth more fruit. The image of an axe at the root speaks to the removal of the tree. John speaks also as a prophet, warning those who are coming to hear him that they are in danger of being judged, removed, and thrown into the fire. John gives a stark picture of coming judgement by the greater one. Yet John speaks favorably of the coming of one who is greater than he, one who will not baptize with water but with Holy Spirit and fire, a more complete baptism than the water baptism of John. Unlike John's baptism with water, the coming one's baptism will bring forgiveness purchased on the cross by Jesus through his blood. John speaks to a new kingdom of heaven where there is, through the blood of Jesus, forgiveness of sin and empowerment through the pouring out of Holy Spirit to be changed within and sin no more. John has told us this new kingdom has come near. It has begun, it is happening. Out of the wilderness, God again is bringing about a new kingdom, a kingdom that has already come near with the arrival of the long anticipated one, Jesus Christ.

We should not miss the last part of John's message to all of those who have come and especially to those who have received the baptism of repentance he offers. John tells the crowds that Jesus comes with a winnowing fork in his hand, the image of one who will separate the good from the bad. Don't miss the positive message in John's words that the good are gathered into the storehouse and brought into the kingdom of heaven. The bad are those who are judged not to be worthy and are burned with unquenchable fire. Jesus is not just a kind, gentle, loving lamb, but will also come in power to separate the good from the bad, to judge all people. John's message is that what separates the good from the bad is not their heritage. They are not good because they are in Abraham's family. Likewise, we are not good because we have grown up in a Christian home or come to church or help those in need. We are good, we are found in the kingdom of heaven, through Jesus' work on the cross, our belief in him, and being found by our judge as those whose lives are marked by fruit. We need to ask ourselves, "Do we indeed bear

this fruit of repentance? Are we bringing forth fruit in our lives in the opportunities we have been given to be about the work of the kingdom? Is there a change in our lives we can see as we reflect back that marks for us the inward change in our lives?” As we finish this time of proclamation and prepare our hearts to enter into Communion with Jesus, let us open our hearts to God and ask Holy Spirit to touch any sin that clings to us, any temptation that we struggle with, or any places of fallenness or brokenness that yet need Jesus’ healing touch and the strengthening of Holy Spirit. Let us take all of the sin that yet clings to us and let it become a place of repentance and a fresh turning to the Lord. Take time in the Communion service to confess our sins to Jesus, receive forgiveness, grace, mercy, and peace, and then come and commune with Jesus at his table. His body and blood were given for us that we might receive grace. Let us open our hearts this morning to repentance and for a making of straight paths in our lives so that the way for the King will be opened and cleared of all obstacles. We, like the people who heard John in the wilderness, have the opportunity to see our hearts turned to our children and their hearts turned to us. During Communion, come and meet Jesus here at his table. And then after we have feasted with him, go forth to all the world in the power of Holy Spirit into the mission of Jesus.

Pray with me: Jesus, we come to you as those whose hearts yearn for a new turning to our children and a turning of their hearts to you. Help us to be like those in the wilderness who heard John’s call to repentance and came, confessed their sin, and turned to you, and you in turn brought the kingdom of heaven close. Help us to experience the one who is to come in the now of our lives. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 1-13: NEW TESTAM (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) (p. 41). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition

ⁱⁱ Matthew 1-13: NEW TESTAM (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) (p. 39). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ NRSV Matthew 3:2