

## Week of December 20, 2020

### Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing,<sup>2</sup> “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”<sup>3</sup> He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:  
*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”*

<sup>4</sup> John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.<sup>5</sup> People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him.<sup>6</sup> As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.<sup>7</sup> Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?”<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.<sup>9</sup> And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones.<sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.<sup>11</sup> I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.<sup>12</sup> The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

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### Repent!

When I think of vipers, I don’t usually think of the snake, but of Dodge’s sports car of the same name. It’s likely a result of us not having the reptilian viper native to these parts - if I think of a snake it’s almost always a black snake or a water moccasin - and the auto version coming out in my childhood, when I was particularly obsessed with such things. As such, I don’t really know much about the snake that was at the heart of John the Baptist’s insult to the Pharisees and Sadducees who showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John. It turns out, after doing a little research, that in the ancient world vipers were associated with the murder of parents, as they kill their mothers when they are born. It’s a creepy little fact, but knowing it makes the insult John gave the religious leaders cut deeper. It’s not just “you slippery little devils,” but “you parent killing snakes!” And it was more than a simple insult because John didn’t like them, he was insulting how they lived their faith. Ancient peoples, including the forefathers and mothers of our faith, considered the murder of parents to be one of the worst crimes imaginable, one that invited divine retribution. This insult essentially said that the Pharisees and Sadducees were guilty of murdering their heavenly parent by how they misled and abused their power. Those same Pharisees and Sadducees would go on to plot the murder of Jesus, who is God among us, therefore making them guilty of the crime John’s insult implied. His call for them to repent was a way to get them back on the right path before it was too late.

John’s message of repentance wasn’t just for that brood of vipers, but for all people. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon on John the Baptist, called him “God’s doberman pinscher.” He tested those who claimed they wanted what God was offering and confronted all the misguided assumptions about what following God means. His call to repent was that confrontation, and people responded because it was a gift. For many of us, hearing “repent!” brings to mind street preachers shouting fire and brimstone through a bullhorn. It seems more of a threat than a gift. But what if our idea of repentance is all wrong? In her sermon, Taylor went on to say that most of us were taught that repentance is all about checking our pride - in humility we announce our terrible behavior and seek forgiveness - but pride isn’t really the problem for most people. Instead, she says, pride is the opposite of the real problem - despair. Too many are afflicted with feeling “that things will never change for us, that we will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess

someone else has made of them, but in any case that there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of new life.”<sup>1</sup> Repentance, then, is about not letting despair get the best of us. It means trusting in the fullness of God’s promise, allowing us to participate more fully in God’s reconciling work through Jesus Christ. This is a definition of repentance that can transform us from hopeless, beat down by all that is not in our control, to hopeful, reliant on all that’s in God’s control.

The Pharisees and Sadducees weren’t willing to put their trust in God. They talked big, but when it came down to it, they only trusted in their own power and were constantly trying to protect it out of fear. That led to widespread hopelessness and injustice. John has offered a pathway to hope - trust in God’s promises, live like you actually believe them, worry more about how to move forward through those promises than past misguided behaviors, and you will find hope. This message at the beginning of the Gospel, before we’re even introduced to Jesus’ ministry, is critical for us to be able to engage in all he teaches. Let us therefore repent, trusting in the promises of God, that we may be prepared to meet the fulfillment of God’s promises in Jesus Christ.

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*God of promise, you sent a messenger before you to give us a path to hope that is found only in your love and grace. May we find true repentance, turning away from despair and offering you our full trust and devotion, knowing that because of you, new life is not only possible, but guaranteed. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, B. B. (1997). A Cure for Despair: Matthew 3:1-12. *Journal for Preachers*, 16-18. Retrieved December 9, 2020.