

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 in the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

FACING '24

Matthew 3:1-12

Our scripture is packed with meaning as we begin a new year. How could it be 2024 already? I just got used to writing 23 on my checks! It also means I have to get my driver's license renewed. Always in the presidential election year. And what a crazy time 24 is going to be with so much at stake in the direction our country is going to take for the foreseeable future. I am certain there will be surprises in the months ahead that no one anticipated. Fasten your seat belts and your chin straps!

That's on a national level, but our personal lives will have surprises as well. Perhaps you will win the lottery. Who knows? But it is traditional when we turn the page on a fresh year to make resolutions to guide us going forward. John tells us to *Bear fruit worthy of repentance*. Repentance is built upon the foundation of Confession. Does this mean we have an opportunity to start over? Can we just nullify the past, receive

forgiveness for what we wish we could change and do it over? To borrow a golfer's term, can we take a mulligan without a penalty for the shot we just hit into the woods and play on as if it never happened? In a word, NO, we cannot. It did happen and everyone knows it and everyone remembers it. And if we can't figure out why we did it, we will certainly repeat it.

There is a coincidental connecting point between beginning a new year and our lesson. John is inviting those who gathered to repent—to start again, as it were. In Judaism, this was symbolized by purification by water. In essence, wash the dirt away and clean up your act. John particularly targeted the Pharisees and Sadducees whose corruption was legendary and based upon their arrogance: *You presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our ancestor.* In other words, “We are justified by our ancestry. We don't have to *Bear fruit worthy of repentance.* We can take mulligans whenever we want.”

Now I want to make clear that since Jesus is presumed to be sinless, repentance was a non-issue for him. Instead of cleansing, his baptism was understood as an anointment for his special mission. *I baptize you with water,* John says, *but he will baptize you with the Holy spirit and fire.* And when Presbyterians baptize, we are doing something similar—we are both anointing and welcoming the initiate into the community of faith.

What is important is that we learn from the past rather than having amnesia about it. For if we haven't learned anything, we are vulnerable to repeating it. The bloody war in Gaza which has cost thousands of lives already is a prime example. It is a catastrophic repeat of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict which hardly began in 1948 when the nation of Israel was founded on partitioned Palestinian land causing immediate conflict between Arab and Jewish inhabitants. If you read your Bible and your history books you can see that this conflict actually goes back centuries with land grabs and genocides which fomented hatreds that run deep in the consciousness of both sides. You cannot erase that past because like a chalk board what was already printed there does not disappear. Even if the IDF killed every member of Hamas, they have inspired an entirely new generation of freedom fighters who will return to repeat it. That is guaranteed. Unless both sides repent of their responsibility for past conflicts, it will all happen again.

So you may be asking yourself if all our efforts to change are futile, particularly when you look at the history of our species. It is tempting to blame God for all of this. But have we not learned that God does not intervene to save us from our choices or their consequences? If God did

choose to do that, Israel would not exist because there would have been no Holocaust in the first place—nor a world war which led to it. There would be no slavery, genocides, the mistreatment of children and all of the assaults on our planet. Poverty and lack of any kind would not exist. In other words, we would be living in Paradise. This is obvious. What is also obvious is that God has granted us the authority to choose, to make decisions and to act on our own beliefs.

So what is the message here? Knowing it is impossible to start over as if none of our horrible history of mistakes doesn't count, we have to understand through Jesus' baptism that God still has a vision for us and wants us to wake up and use the tools given to us to transform the world to a place that does not use terrorism and war to accomplish its ends. We actually have to use the turmoil we are going through to inspire us to change direction through different behaviors. And it is clear we have to do it together. We have to listen to each other and to understand others have different experiences which have molded their perceptions of reality and their choices. This is how we start over in making the seismic changes that God desires for us. The challenges are right in our faces.

It is going to take years, maybe another century or more, so we cannot despair when change does not occur quickly. It cannot and it

won't. Nevertheless, we need to keep faith and to keep our hearts open and to be steadfast in our commitment to the mission Jesus came to lead us on. So let us Face 24 with the resolution to not falter and to keep it going.

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