

St. Matthew's Church

101205A Message from the Desert: Repent!

Pastor James R. Pennington

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

A MESSAGE FROM THE DESERT: REPENT!

Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2010

During the Christmas holy-day season many of us will be doing entertaining. We take certain steps to ready ourselves for the visit of guests. The first thing we do is work on the guest list and send out invitations and make telephone calls, and we make our food purchases. We dust and vacuum and tidy up, finding places to stow the clutter. Thus when the doorbell rings announcing the arrival of our first guest, we are ready.

In today's Gospel lesson from Matthew we see God going about similar preparations for the arrival of the Christ. John came preaching; a herald as used by military commander who gives an important announcement, or for the herald of a king who made a proclamation. John was God's herald, proclaiming an important message: "Repent ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The proclamation is quite clear; Repentance and Baptism is the way to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Let us reflect on John the Baptist, a very special participant: "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

**"A voice of one calling in the desert,
Prepare the way for the Lord,
Make straight paths for Him."**

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (Matthew 3:1-6). John the Baptist appears with a prophetic word that God was about to act again in history. The prophetic spirit was once more active, after a long period of silence during which much of Judaism had come to

feel that God had withdrawn from involvement in their lives and history. John announces the coming of the Kingdom and this is a prominent theme in Matthew being mentioned some 50 times. John ministry prepares the way and Jesus is the Way. John is the forerunner of the Messiah, and Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus brings the dynamic redemptive reign of God within history ahead of the final (eschatological) consummation of the kingdom of God at the end of history. The redemptive blessings of God's reign are now available.

John the Baptist told the people of his day to repent, "for the kingdom of heaven is a hand." The Greek word for repent means "change one's mind," so in reality repentance is a change of attitude. It is not an emotional feeling but a moral purpose. It is a determined decision that one is done with sin, that he has renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil.

John Divinely Sent: In Malachi 3:1 reads; "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me;" And in Malachi 4:5-6, the very last verses of the Old Testament say; "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn he hearts of the father to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." An angel had told John's father, Zachariah, that John would fulfill this last prophecy and Jesus subsequently identified John as the "Elijah" Malachi had foretold (Matthew 17:10-13).

The fulfillment of these prophecies could hardly have been left out, and by introducing John as their exact fulfillment. Matthew rightly ties together the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. There had not been a prophet in Israel for four hundred years, since Malachi. But after four hundred silent years, the flow of God's revelation starts again as Matthew picks up precisely where Malachi had left off.

William Barclay said the coming of John was like: "*A light which lit up the dark places*" and "*a wind which swept from God throughout the country.*"

John the Baptist was a Great Prophet: John the Baptist was obviously a good and grand man who was committed to God's will and purpose. Some of the people came to listen and out of curiosity, some from boredom, but many with a spiritual hunger and were led to confession and renewal. Thomas Gray's words come to mind: "From his lip the truth prevailed with

double sway; the fools who came to scoff, remained to pray.” John said of Jesus, “He must become greater; I must become less.” And Jesus said of John, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” The message of John the Baptist can be summarized in these words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

John’s Great Promise: *“After me will come one who is more powerful than I.”* John did not know who the Messiah was at this point, because he had not received the sign that would identify Him. He said, “I would not have known Him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” But when Jesus was pointed out to John as the one expected, John identified Him “as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” This is exactly what we have to proclaim about Jesus Christ today; who He is and what He has done. It is the essence of the Christian gospel.

We are people of God who have been entrusted with the ministry of servanthood and hospitality; we are to extend God’s invitation. We are the witnesses of the incarnation; God should make a difference in our lives. The way is often very difficult, and our invitation is not always received positively. Sometimes it is refused.

Our responsibility is to continue to invite others to the feast: to be faithful to our calling in season and out of season; to ensure that each of us reflect the open arms of our God, whose desire is that we all have life, and that abundantly, to be ready to love all of God’s people with the unconditional love that God is; to embrace and care for the totality of God’s creation. We are responsible for preparing ourselves and the world for the advent of Jesus.

During the Advent season let us, like John the Baptist and others who have come before us, prepare ourselves for our ministries and prepare the world, or just our little corner of the world, for the advent of the Lord.

With the help of God we can be voices crying in the wilderness of our time. We have repented, and have been baptized into the body of Christ for this calling. We can deliver the invitations.