

## Apocalyptic Advent: The Kingdom of God Has Come Near

La Grave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

Matthew 3:1-12

Today we're beginning a new series called Apocalyptic Advent. Apocalyptic means "revealing" – pointing out things not previously known. It orients us toward the ultimate concerns of God's reign.

So during the next four weeks we will be sitting with different New Testament passages that point us to the reality of God's Kingdom—a kingdom inaugurated 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, and a kingdom anticipated in all its fullness when Jesus returns.

If you've been enjoying some of the coziness of the Christmas season—twinkle lights, candles, warm socks, football and too much pumpkin pie, this morning's Scripture passage might be jarring. Today we start with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is a firebrand. It's in his job description.

Wanted, the position posting had read: A prophet who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. Must be willing to endure heat and cold; to live in lonely places; to speak truth to power. Singular devotion to the LORD required; half-hearted applicants need not apply. Please note that this is a volunteer position. Uniform provided; room and board are the responsibility of the applicant.

Incredibly, John answers the ad. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son has grown to adulthood. Called by and filled with the Spirit who has been upon him his whole life, he takes up his post in the Judean desert.

John's unique ministry to the people of Israel takes far beyond the synagogue, and possibly in conflict with it. He isn't just baptizing converts to Judaism; he's baptizing everybody! Everyone—Jew and Gentile—needs to get ready.

Because John, like other heralds in history, is announcing the coming of something that can't be stopped. It's coming, like it or not. An invasion of sorts. The time to warn people is now, to prepare them. They need to make some decisions.

John's main message is simple and urgent. Every time he preaches the sermon is the same. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The people come from all around. To demonstrate their change of heart, they submit to a public washing in the Jordan River. They are marked women and men now, identifiable and therefore accountable for the change they claim to be making.

The crowds streaming out to the desert are so sizable that the religious authorities decide they better take a trip out to Judea and see what's up. John is not convinced their interest is sincere.

"You snake spawn! Who warned you to get out of town before God's wrath falls? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! 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."

The reality of the inbreaking kingdom of God is the reason for the stern message. It's coming in like a freight train: if you stand in its way unprepared the impact will hurt. God's holy and powerful presence has always been dangerous.

And now the new era, so long anticipated, is here. The King all Israel has stood on tiptoe for has come. Repent! John says. In Jesus the kingdom of heaven has come near.

All four of the Gospels introduce Jesus' ministry through the firebrand preaching of John the Baptist. If John the Baptist were filling the pulpit here today, how would we respond?

In his memoir *Where the Light Fell*, Philip Yancey describes an experience from summer camp in his youth.

"Friday night is the camp's final shot at converting the unconverted and heating up the lukewarm. We're tired and sunburned, aware that we will be returning to homes without swimming pools and foosball, and that school will soon take over our lives. In a word we are vulnerable....

When the time comes for the altar call Norman Pyle takes over and we start singing "Just as I Am." After the first verse Pyle says, "Maybe you've held out all week determined not to give in. Friend, are

you ready to meet your maker? Are you ready to die? Why wait? You never know what tomorrow may bring....

Before long, fully two-thirds of the audience has come forward to kneel at the front...

Finally, the clincher. "I have one last invitation...any of you with unconfessed sin in your life, any sin whatsoever. God is calling you to come forward and confess it." Campers stream down the aisles as he prompts us. "A careless word, perhaps...a flash of anger... a laziness in your spiritual life.... The stream [of campers] becomes a river as the pianist gallantly pounds out another refrain.

This is my sixth straight week at camp, Yancey says. Every other week I have gone forward at the final service. Tonight my soul is calloused. Eventually only two of us remain standing in the large auditorium. I edge closer to my friend Rodney for moral support as the pianist begins yet another round of verses. Fellow campers kneeling down front glare back at us in irritation; we are delaying the late-night round of refreshments.

"I don't know, Rodney," I whisper. "I can't think of any sins tonight, can you?"

"No unconfessed ones," he replies with a tight grin. The two of us hold out until at last the speaker gives up, says the closing prayer and calls it a night. When I walk out my knees ache from standing so long." (147-148)

Yancey's story paints a picture of the discomfort some of us have with firebrand preaching. We worry that at best it is overly sentimental; or at worst it can be manipulative. Even assuming the best intentions, what if the person preaching in the name of God tries to run roughshod over the work of the Spirit of God in an individual life?

Those concerns can be matched from the opposite angle with another worry: What if the person preaching in the name of God is so understated that people don't hear the urgency of the good news? God's kingdom *has* come. It *is* coming. Jesus *will* return to judge the living and the dead. *Not* warning people would be unkind.

So how do we hear John's fiery preaching? Are we suspicious and on guard? Do we welcome it, eager for the enemies of God to get what they deserve?

Notice who is in the crosshairs of John's strongest, saltiest language. It isn't the average Israelite or Roman citizen. In Matthew, John reserves his pointed rebuke for the people who should know better: Israel's religious leaders.

When we worry about abuses of power in the name of God, there's some comfort in seeing that the people John calls out most pointedly in Matthew's gospel are the ones responsible for helping lead others toward God. That gave me something to ponder this week as I continue working out my own calling with fear and trembling.

Because John has choice words for the religious leaders—the people who took God's law, personal piety and tradition the most seriously. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are the ones who draw his ire.

John's message for them means that the obstacles that need to be moved out of the way for the coming of the Lord aren't first of all out there in the rest of the world. *The obstacles are in the insiders. The churchy people are the ones who get the sternest warnings.*

To the people of God inclined to approach him halfheartedly, hoping that he'll help us get where we want to go; or keep us safe and comfortable on our own terms, John says: "Who warned you to get fire insurance? Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

To leaders and church members inclined to rest on inherited faith or our insider status, John says, "Oh, no. Don't start to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father. *Produce fruit* in your lives that shows your faith is living."

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

When you think of repentance, maybe you think of our times of corporate confession that are part of our service each week. Maybe you think about godly sadness or guilt over something that you've done or failed to do. Maybe you think of your longing for the whole world to turn around and acknowledge God. Those things are part of the picture. But repentance involves something else too.

Repentance means changing our mind *and our behavior* when faced with new information. It is a turning around in our relationship with God, and with each other too.

"I'm sorry. Will you forgive me? How can I make it right?"

Repentance is our signal that we're willing to cooperate with God. When we turn around, it changes us. It changes our relationships. It spills over into the communities we form. It is a lifelong dance in our relationship with God.

What reason does John give for repentance? It's because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

The "Kingdom of Heaven" simply means God's reign, God's realm. In the Kingdom of Heaven, things are the way the King wants them to be.

Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and bestselling author, writes this about John the Baptist's motivating vision:

"John the Baptist's... whole being, his entire existence, was on fire with the reality of the One Who Comes. He was in the grip of what I call *apocalyptic transvision*—that vision given to the church that sees through the appearances of this world to the blazing power and holiness of the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist is the ultimate embodiment of the apocalyptic character of Christian faith—faith that is oriented not to the past but to the future, not to the repetition of religious exercises but to the person of the Messiah, not to arrangements as they are but to an utterly new authority and dominion."

When Jesus comes, the sharp lines between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth blur. The rules of engagement between sinful people and a Holy God are transformed as a Holy God stands in the place of a sinful people.

The kingdom of heaven being at hand is good news! The reason for the repentance isn't simply the fear of God's just judgment and punishment for our sin. The just judgments of God show us our need for saving.

At the end of the day, John knows the baptism he preaches isn't enough to save the people from their sin. "I baptize you with water for repentance," he says. "But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. *He himself* will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

I'm just the warm-up act, John says. Jesus *himself* will actually accomplish the work of washing you inside and out. Jesus *himself* will endure the baptism of the judgment you deserve. Jesus *himself* will submit to the punishment and alienation from God that you fear.

After all, Jesus *himself* is called Savior: he will save his people from their sins.

Imagine a parent watching a toddler in the yard wandering toward the street. The parent knows the danger out there. First Dad says, "Come back here, Bud! You're too far away." But Nathan's only two. He turns, looks at Dad, and keeps running in the opposite direction. "Nathan! The road is dangerous. Cars. Turn around."

Finally, dad drops the pruning shears to sprint over to the edge of the yard. Nathan's already in the road. Dad flings himself into the path of oncoming traffic, scoops up Nathan and brings him safely back to the porch.

When that story is told and retold to Nathan throughout his life, he begins to feel how much his dad loves him. And the goodness of his dad's life-endangering love calls out of him an echoing response of love in return.

Our response to Jesus coming, to the inbreaking kingdom of heaven, to such a momentous change in the fabric of history is to begin a lifetime of answering love for our savior and king. As we turn our faces and our feet toward God in repentance, we do that standing not on a path strewn with obstacles but on the paved highway of God's grace.

Thanks be to God for such a great Savior.

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