

A Dramatic Change of Mind and Direction

Matthew 3:1-12 (December 4, 2022)

Matthew 3:1-12

3In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” 4Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7But 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? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do 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. 10Even 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. 11‘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. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’”

Historical Context

Matthew’s details of his clothes, food, and locale signals to his ancient readers that John the Baptist represents the return of Elijah, which was to occur before the coming of the messiah (Matthew 3:1, 4; see 11:14). John announces the advent of God’s reign using the exact language Jesus will use (verse 2; see also 4:17; 10:7), but John does not initiate the turning of the ages. In language Matthew and Luke (Luke 3:1-17) add to Mark’s version of this scene (Mark 1:2-8), John declares that he is but an inferior forerunner to the “one coming after” him (verses 7-12).

Theme: A Dramatic Change of Mind and Direction

The root meaning of “to repent” is “to turn” or to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. To repent is turn away from the values and practices of the old age (e.g., idolatry, violence, injustice, exploitation, slavery, and scarcity) and to turn towards the values and practices of the Realm of God (e.g., love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance).

In this context, repentance includes feeling sorry for one’s personal sins, but it is much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one’s life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age, to turn away from such complicity, and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven.

John offers listeners a choice. They can repent, and join the movement toward the Realm, or they can continue to collude with the old age and face eternal condemnation at the final judgment. As Matthew’s gospel unfolds, Jesus reinforces the importance of making this choice, then goes a step farther. Jesus instructs the community how to embody the qualities of the new world while still living in the period of transition between old and new. Repentance is just the first step.