MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Voice in the Wilderness

Reverend Scott Johnson | November 15, 2026 | Matthew 3:1-12

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5

Our Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 40, verses one through five. Isaiah 40, one through five. This is the inerrant and infallible and inspired word of God.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"

New Testament Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

And now let's turn to Matthew chapter three. This is our sermon text this morning. Matthew three, verses one through 12. Matthew three, verses one through 12.

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."' Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

"But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to 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 he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. 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 gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Anticipation and Preparation

This is the time of year when we start to look forward to the holidays that are coming up, as I'm sure you are well aware. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's are all just around the corner now, coming up quickly. And as the holiday season comes closer, the more excited we become about the things that we are going to do, the things we are looking forward to. Maybe you'll be traveling to see family out of town, or perhaps you'll have family coming to visit you. Maybe you're excited about Thanksgiving Day, the wonderful food you'll eat, or opening presents on Christmas morning.

And as the holidays come closer, our anticipation and excitement grow. But we also think about all the preparations that we need to make for the upcoming holiday season. There is Thanksgiving food to prepare, Christmas cookies to bake, travel arrangements to make, presents to buy, and so on.

Our passage this morning is about a time in the life of the nation of Israel in which there was tremendous anticipation and excitement in the air. The Israelites were buzzing with anticipation. And it wasn't because of some special holiday that was just around the corner on their calendar, but the people were filled at that time with the hope, the anticipation of something far greater, something that they thought was about to take place, and that was the coming of the Messiah, the arrival of the Christ, the Savior, the King of Israel, whom God had promised His people for so many centuries.

And this hope was confirmed when God raised up John the Baptist as the one whom He appointed to announce to the people of Israel that the day had come: the Christ had arrived, the kingdom of God has drawn near. And just like we must prepare for the holidays that are coming each year, so the people of Israel, they had to prepare for the appearance of Christ. They had to be ready for his coming.

And John's message to the people was, "Here's what you must do in order to get ready for the coming of the Lord, for the Christ." And what was that? Well, John told the people, "Repent. You must confess your sins. You must repent of your sins. And you must receive the baptism for the forgiveness of your sins."

And so our passage this morning is concerned with this extraordinary prophet and the extraordinary message that he declared, this prophet that God raised up to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of their Savior. And today, as we look at this passage together, we'll consider the man and the message. Who was John the Baptist? And we'll also consider the message that he proclaimed. And as we'll see, today we very much need to hear the same message that John the Baptist declared to the people of Israel back then.

The Man: Who Was John the Baptist?

First of all, the man. Who was John the Baptist? If you had been one of the many, many Israelites who were going out to the Jordan to see John the Baptist, the first thing you would have noticed, even before you heard what he had to say, you would have noticed what he looked like and how he was dressed. And Matthew tells us in verse four that John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. And so John wore the rough clothing of a prophet.

And not only that, but he lived the life of a prophet. He was out in the wilderness. Matthew tells us that his food was locusts and wild honey. I think that's one biblical diet that really hasn't caught on with anybody yet. Locusts and wild honey. And so looking at John, you would have seen a man who for all the world looks like a true prophet of God.

And this in itself would have caused your heart to thrill with excitement. It's been 400 years since the prophet Malachi died. And during that time, God did not raise up another prophet to declare the words of God to his people. But now here before your very eyes is a genuine prophet of the Lord.

And when you looked again at what John was wearing, his garment of camel's hair, the leather belt around his waist, you couldn't help but think that this was not just another prophet, but this was a very special prophet. This was the prophet Elijah whom God said he would raise up and send to the people of Israel before the coming of the Lord.

And so you would remember how John the Baptist, or rather Elijah, was described in the Old Testament. Second Kings 1:8, "He wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist." And as you listen to the preaching of John about the coming of the Lord, about the coming of one who is mightier than he, another scripture would come to your mind. Malachi 4:5, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes."

And so you would have every reason to believe, looking at John, hearing his message, that this extraordinary man in the wilderness, that he was none other than the prophet Elijah, the prophet whom God said he would send to the people of Israel to declare the coming of the Messiah. And that's exactly who John the Baptist was. He was sent by God to the people of Israel to announce to them that the Lord was about to visit his people through the Christ. And Matthew tells us that John fulfilled also the prophecy of Isaiah, verse three, "For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.""

Now, it's impossible for us to think about who John the Baptist was, who he was as a man, as a prophet. It's impossible for us to think about that without at the same time thinking about who Jesus Christ is. And that's because the entire life and ministry of John the Baptist was devoted to one thing and one thing only, and that was to point the people of Israel to Jesus Christ. John the Baptist was all about diverting people's attention from him and putting it upon the Lord Jesus.

This is why Jesus would say later in Matthew, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." What an amazing thing to say about John. There has not arisen a single man as great as him. And why did Jesus say that? It's because there was no person whose life and work was so closely connected with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. So he was the greatest. However, his greatness was because he was pointing others to the greater one, to Jesus.

And so there was only one John the Baptist, and there could only be one John the Baptist. Only John could fulfill this unique calling of God to be the forerunner, the one to herald the arrival of Christ. He was an extraordinary man with an extraordinary ministry.

However, there is a sense in which each one of us ought to be like John the Baptist in our desire and in the heart that we would have that Jesus Christ would be glorified through us and by us. Like John the Baptist, we should desire nothing more that we too would be instruments in the hands of God to make Jesus Christ known to others. Because that is what you are all about as a Christian. You are all about Jesus, who you are. What God has called you to do in this world has everything to do with Jesus Christ. You are who you are because of the love and the grace that God has shown you in Jesus Christ.

And all that you do as a believer, you do bearing the name of Christ. You do all that you do, the life that you live, you live as one in submission to Christ, bearing His name, doing all things for Him, for His sake. This is why God created you. This is why God has put you on this earth. This is why God has redeemed you through His Son, Jesus, that you might be an instrument to bring glory and praise and honor to your Savior, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so you are not John the Baptist. But like John the Baptist, you ought to be able to say, and it should be the desire of your heart to say, with John the Baptist, speaking of Christ, "He must increase, I must decrease." My life must be lived in such a way that all things are giving glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, my Savior.

The Message: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

And so we've looked at the man who John the Baptist was, but now let's look at his message. What did he proclaim?

The first thing you'll notice in the way in which Matthew reports or gives us account of John the Baptist is the first thing he tells us about John is not so much what he preached, but what he did, and that is he baptized. And you see that in the title that Matthew gives to John. He is John the Baptist. And so a good part of his ministry was spent in the water. He was baptizing the people of Israel. Matthew tells us that people were coming from all over the place, from Jerusalem, from Judea, from all the region about the Jordan, and they were coming to him to be baptized by him.

But John the Baptist could very well be called John the Preacher. And that's because his ministry of baptism had everything to do with the message that he preached. And what was that message? Well, Matthew gives us a very neat one-sentence summary of the message that John preached. He gives that to us in verse two, and that is this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And so the first thing that John declared to the people of Israel was this command from God, this imperative that they must repent of their sins. And the baptism that John applied to the people of Israel when they came out to him was a baptism that served as a visible sign that by the grace of God, a person had truly repented of his sins, that therefore he was spiritually prepared, he was ready for the coming of the Lord and the person of Jesus Christ. This is how the people were fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. This is how they were making straight his paths, preparing the way of the Lord. It was by their repentance, by confessing their sins, by turning from them, by being baptized by John. This is the way in which they were preparing for the coming of the Lord.

Now, in a few minutes, we'll see how John's call to repentance is a message that we need to hear today, even as Christians, just as much as the people needed to hear then. But before we look at that, I want to focus with you for now on the reason why John issued this call to the people of Israel to repent. And that's because, as he puts it in verse 2, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

The Kingdom of Heaven, this is the very same thing as the Kingdom of God that we read about in the other Gospels. Very generally, very succinctly, what the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven refers to is the rule or the reign of God over His people on Earth. But more specifically, the kingdom of heaven refers to the rule of God over His people on earth that He promised that He would bring about and carry out through the Christ, through the Messiah, the one whom He would raise up to be both the Savior of Israel and the King of Israel.

And so, this is what the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, refers to: that this ruler, whom God would raise up for the people of Israel, that he would come, establish his rule over his people, and that his rule would be one in which there would both be salvation for the righteous, for those whom God would make righteous, but there would be condemnation for the wicked, judgments for those who did not receive Him.

And so what this means is, for this prophet, for John, to stand in the wilderness, to declare to the people of God that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, this was, we can't even begin to understand or appreciate, I think, just how momentous this was for the people of Israel. This was what they had been waiting for. This was their longing. This was their hopes as a people, as a nation, that one day God would send a king to them, to rule over them, to save them, and to judge the wicked. And so John is declaring, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." The king is coming. It is here. It has arrived.

Now, because as far as John could tell, the coming of the king, the coming of Christ, John thought that this meant immediate and severe judgment on those who were not repentant. And for that reason, he called the people to repentance. In fact, we could call John a fire and brimstone preacher.

Now, to be sure, there was grace in his message. There was gospel in his message. When John says in verse 11 that the Lord will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, that meant salvation, salvation for those who received Christ as their Lord and Savior. And we see that in the book of Acts. They were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost when the Lord, the exalted Lord, He poured out His Spirit upon the church. That was salvation, that was gospel, that was grace.

But according to Matthew, the last words in the preaching of John were an awful warning of terrible judgment for those who would refuse to repent and believe in Christ. Verse 12, look at verse 12: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn." But then these last words, John says, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." And so the message of John was that the Christ was about to come and he would come with both salvation and judgment. As John puts it, "He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire." He would baptize the believing and the repentant with the Holy Spirit for salvation, but he would baptize the unbelieving, the unrepentant with the unquenchable fire of God's judgment.

Why We Must Repent Today

Now again, John the Baptist was a unique man. There'll never be another John the Baptist. He had a unique ministry. Nevertheless, the message that he preached to the people of Israel in that day is a message that you and I need to hear, to take to heart today.

One thing that John the Baptist didn't understand was that Jesus was not going to bring about his judgment against the unrepentant right away. One thing that John could not see was that this day of judgment, when the Lord will judge the unrepentant with unquenchable fire, that this would come later, much, much later. We are still waiting for that day.

But what that means for you and me is this. What it means for all people everywhere is this, that the message of John is the message that we need to hear. Christ is coming again. He is coming as judge, and therefore we must repent. We must repent of our sin. Let me put this as bluntly as I can. In the spirit of John the Baptist, if you do not repent of your sin, when Jesus comes again, he will not meet you as your savior to take you to heaven. He will meet you as your judge to condemn you to hell. That is the importance of repentance.

Now you might say, "Wait a minute, isn't the message of the gospel that I am saved by putting my faith in Jesus Christ, by believing that he died for my sin upon the cross?" Yes, of course it is. That is the wonderful promise of God. If you entrust yourself to Jesus Christ by faith, you will be saved. Salvation is by faith alone. You are saved, you are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, apart from works. Praise the Lord for that.

But the faith in Christ by which you are saved is a faith that is always joined with, if it is true faith, it is always joined with repentance, repentance. You cannot truly put your trust and faith in Jesus Christ for salvation if you do not at the same time, by that same faith, repent of your sin. And so saving faith by which alone we are saved is a repentant faith.

And John is not the only one who preached this message. We can't say, "Well, that was John. He loved to preach about the coming judgment. Let me listen to Jesus." Well, what did Jesus say? Well, he said the very same thing. Matthew 4:17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" They were preaching the same sermon.

What Is True Repentance?

Well, this is true. If we must repent because the kingdom of heaven, it has arrived, but Christ the judge is coming again, we ought to know, we ought to want to know what repentance is all about. What does repentance look like? What is repentance?

Well, some of you may know that the Greek word for repentance means to change your mind or to change one's mind. Strictly speaking, that is true. That's what the word means. But in the

Bible, repentance means so much more than that. It really refers to a change of life, a change of life, a change of direction, not just a change of mind.

To repent of your sin means that you hate your sin, and this is key, that you turn from it. You turn from your sin, and you turn to God, and you seek to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. You seek to walk before God in new obedience.

Now, repentance does not mean that you obtain some sort of sinless perfection in this life. That is impossible. We will never attain sinlessness until the life to come. Repentance does not mean that you free yourself from all sin. We will always struggle as long as we are in this world with the sin that still is within us.

But repentance means that you turn away from sin. You forsake a life lived in sin. You forsake the patterns of sin that are in your life. It's a new orientation. It's a new direction. It's looking to Christ. It's seeking to live a life pleasing to the Lord Jesus. And so you no longer seek to live for yourself, to please your own desires, but you seek, by the grace of God, to live a life pleasing to Him, to Christ. That is what repentance is all about, and this is what God calls us to.

Lessons on Repentance from John's Ministry

And the ministry of John the Baptist teaches us some lessons about repentance that are very valuable for us.

First of all, Matthew tells us in verse six that when the people of Israel were going out to John to be baptized by him, in verse six it says that they were confessing their sins. They were confessing their sins. And part of what repentance means is that you confess your sins to God, but you also, as appropriate, you confess your sins to other people as well.

And this is one of the most powerful weapons that God gives you in your struggle and your fight against sin, especially private sins. It is to confess your sins to somebody you trust. Sin has a way of thriving in secrecy. The power of sin is especially strong when it lurks in darkness, when there's no light shed upon it. But when you break it out into the open, when you confess your sins, when you confide in a friend you can trust, it has an amazing way of breaking that power of sin over you.

Another lesson we learn about repentance from the ministry of John the Baptist is that even those who are most closely associated with the true religion must repent of their sins. In fact, we

could put it this way: especially those, especially those who are the most religious must be the most careful to repent of their sins.

In verse seven, John sees the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming out to him as he's baptizing. These were the leaders of Israel. These were the pious ones, the devout ones. These are the ones everyone looked up to as models of what it means to be a faithful Jew, to be faithful as a man of God. But what does John say to these Pharisees and Sadducees? Look at verse seven, he says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

We wouldn't consider John a seeker-sensitive preacher. He was not afraid to tell people what they needed to hear. But here were a people who thought that because of their race, because of their devotion to the true religion, that they were the children of God. They were the chosen of God, so they thought. But John says to them, "No, you're not the children of Abraham. If God wants more children of Abraham, he can raise up children from these rocks. You are children, all right. You're children of vipers." That's what brood of vipers means. You're the offspring of vipers. And so John tells him, in effect, "You have no place in the kingdom of heaven."

And why did John do this? Why did he meet these fine, upstanding, devout men with such a vehement denunciation? It was because they had not repented. They were not coming to him in a spirit of humility and repentance. John knew that. And so he says to them in verse eight, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

And what this means for us is this. It doesn't matter if you grew up in the church. It doesn't matter if you have been baptized and a good member or a member in good standing in a church your whole life. It doesn't matter if you have lived your whole life an outwardly moral life. It doesn't matter that the whole world knows you as a fine Christian person. None of that matters if you have not repented of your sin. None of that counts for anything in the sight of God if you have not repented of your sin.

I was just talking two nights ago with another pastor in our presbytery, and we were exchanging stories of pastors and missionaries, seminary professors whom we knew, who had all been at one point exposed as engaging in scandalous, shocking, even criminal, sinful behavior. These were the Sadducees and Pharisees in our time. And yet they were caught up in egregious sin.

The more we identify with the Christian faith, the more careful we need to be that our Christianity is not what we do, but that our Christianity is something that flows from within. It

flows from without a heart. A heart that is humble and contrite before the Lord. A heart that recognizes our desperate need for grace, a heart that acknowledges that apart from the grace of God, we are nothing but condemned sinners. That's where our Christianity, it needs to be grounded upon that. No matter how much we may serve the church and have good standing in the church, all of that is nothing if we are not repentant before the Lord of our sin and acknowledge that we need his grace.

We learned another lesson about repentance when we see how John the Baptist gave specific instructions to different groups of people and how they were to bear fruits in keeping with repentance. This is not in Matthew's gospel. I'm borrowing this from Luke's gospel. But in Luke's gospel, John tells us, or Luke tells us, how John, he told the wealthy that were coming out to him for repentance, that they must share their clothes and their food with others. John told the tax collectors that they must not collect any more taxes than what they were authorized to collect. In other words, stop ripping off the people. John told the soldiers that they must not extort money with accusations and threats. What John was doing, if we can use the language of our confession of faith, he was calling people to repent of their particular sins particularly.

What would John the Baptist have to say to you today? He might say, "You have to repent of that anger, that resentment that you are harboring in your heart towards that other person. You have to stop watching those videos online. You have to stop making your first priority in life your own personal security or comfort or pleasure." What are the particular sins that you must repent of, particularly today? John's words are still true. We must bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Repentance as Both a Command and a Gift

But we have to hear John's words along with the words of the Apostle Paul. Apostle Paul says in Romans 2:4, "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance." The only way that you can truly repent and bear fruit in keeping with repentance is as you look to the Lord Jesus Christ, as you look to the one in whom God has revealed his mercy, his grace, his love, his kindness to sinful people like you and me.

For the sake of Jesus Christ and because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God, he willingly, he gladly forgives your sins. When you come to Him in repentance and faith, He gladly gives you eternal life when you come to Him, entrusting yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, believing that Jesus died for you to take away your sin.

We hear from John the Baptist that repentance is a command, and it is a command. God commands you and I to repent. It's also true that repentance is a gift. It is a gift of God that only God can give us. And the way to receive the gift of repentance is to confess your sin and kneel before God. And when you do, He will not only forgive your sin, but He will make His truth, His love, His promises, His grace more precious, more desirable to you than all the empty pleasures and promises of sin.

In other words, you will only hate sin, you will only want to turn from it when you love Christ. And you will love Christ only when you receive him by faith and understand and believe in him as the gift of God to you, the gift of his love. And so by the grace of God, we repent at his command only as we receive that repentance as a gift, as we look to the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who died for us, that we might be saved.

Let's pray.