

Matthew 3:1-12

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[0:00] The good animals of Narnia start whispering the news to one another in secret. They are rejoicing that at last Aslan has come. The white witch hears about Aslan's return and her reaction is rather different.

She's horrified. She's terrified at the news and she determines to stop it. She knows what the return of the true king means for her. Well, over the last few weeks here at Trinity, we've been preaching an Advent series.

The word Advent just means arrival or coming. And it's really the time when we start whispering about the return of the true king. It's a time of year when we think back to God's marvelous coming to us in the form of a baby.

It's also the time when we anticipate the second coming, the next coming, when Jesus will return and reign forever. Now, several of the Chronicles of Narnia books have been turned into movies.

When the movie version of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe came out, I read one review that criticized the movie and the book for choosing a lion to symbolize Jesus. According to the Bible, Jesus was a lamb, the reviewer said.

[1:13] Lewis got it wrong. Well, the reviewer didn't know the Bible all that well. Yes, Jesus is the Lamb of God. John the Baptist calls him that. But he's also the great lion of the tribe of Judah, we read in the book of Revelation.

So the king of beasts is not such a bad symbol for the king of kings. But I think this movie reviewer just preferred to think about Jesus as a lamb. Now, this is the Sunday before Christmas.

I imagine that we have some visitors here. Perhaps you're not a Christian, or maybe you're just learning about Christianity. Well, please know you're very welcome here. We're really pleased you've chosen to spend the morning with us.

Whether you're a new Christian, or whether you've been a Christian for decades, there's no better time of year to think about Jesus. And I wonder, how do you like to think about Jesus?

Is he forever the cooing baby who, according to the Christmas carol we just sang, no crying he makes? I don't think that's historically accurate, by the way.

[2:17] Or does he eventually grow up into something maybe a little more lionish? It makes a difference. If the Bible is correct that we are going to meet him one day, it matters for us.

What is this Jesus really like? What would you do if you know you were soon to meet him? Well, this morning we're going to look at a biblical text from the New Testament that tells us what to do.

How to prepare for this meeting of Jesus. Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 3. If you're using the pew Bibles that are provided for you, that's on page 808. You'll see on the page some big numbers.

Those are chapter numbers. And some small numbers. Those are the verse numbers. We're going to be looking today at Matthew chapter 3, verses 1 through 12. Matthew chapter 3, verses 1 through 12.

Please listen to me as I read Matthew 3, 1 through 12. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

[3 : 19] 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 path 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 to raise, or 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.

[4 : 30] 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 hands, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Now this story is not normally talked about as part of the Christmas story. Perhaps it's because of that unquenchable fire bit. It doesn't really seem to fit in with the Christmas spirit.

But also more simply, it's because a long time has elapsed since Jesus' birth. Last week we talked about how Mary and Joseph had to take baby Jesus into temporary exile in Egypt.

By the time John the Baptist begins preaching in the wilderness, Jesus is a grown man. Thirty years have gone by, maybe more. He's just about to go public with his own ministry. So we're a long ways off from that night in Bethlehem.

But in the most important sense, this is absolutely a part of the Christmas story. As we'll see, John the Baptist was in some ways a strange or eccentric figure.

[5 : 39] But you cannot understand the meaning of Christmas if you don't understand his message. The Christmas story is the story of the coming of the true king into a dark and rebellious land.

And our text for this morning, Matthew 3, is really the personal application portion of that story. So we're going to ask three questions together. First, who is this John the Baptist?

Second, what is his message? And third, and perhaps most importantly, what should we do about it? So who is John the Baptist? What is his message? And what are we to do about it?

Well, John the Baptist, he comes and goes pretty quickly in the Bible. If you want, you can read later in Luke 1 about his miraculous birth to elderly parents. You can read in Matthew 14 about he's beheaded by Herod the Tetrarch.

That's the son of the king Herod who tried to kill Jesus. He had publicly criticized this Herod and he paid with it for his life. We don't hear a lot about him in between, except for this account of him preaching and baptizing in the desert.

[6:44] But what we do hear is pretty startling. John was a sensation. He was a celebrity. Everyone in Israel was talking about him. The political and the religious leaders were worried about him.

The ordinary people flocked to him and seemed to love him. No matter who you were, John commanded attention. So what does Matthew 3 tell us about John? Well, we read first off that he was a Baptist.

Now, I realize that some of you who are visiting may be coming from other Christian denominations. You're all very welcome. You may be troubled that this is not John the Presbyterian or John the Methodist. No, this is not a description of a denominational identity.

The word Baptist here just means one who baptizes. We could just translate it baptizer if that worked better. And that's exactly what we see him doing. He takes people and he dunks them under the water of the River Jordan and he pulls them out again.

That's what a Baptist does. It's not so terribly different than what we do sometimes at this church. What is difficult, I think, for us to get, at least at a first reading, is how revolutionary John's actions really were.

[7:50] John didn't invent baptism. In fact, it was standard practice in the day to baptize converts to Judaism. It was a symbol of repentance and new beginnings.

But John was baptizing Jews, not converts. And he was doing it in the River Jordan, the very river that God's people had had to cross to come into the Promised Land after their exile in Egypt and wandering in the desert.

It's like John is saying, this nation has gone astray. It's time for God to start over with a new people. It's time for a new Israel to enter a new Promised Land.

It's time for God's people to finally obey. And people noticed what John was doing. That's why everyone was talking about him. You notice that the religious leaders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, come to check up on him, to see what he's doing.

More about them in a minute. But we see that John was a Baptist. But John was also a preacher of repentance. Look at verse 2 of our text. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[8:55] That's his message. The kingdom of heaven is coming. That's just another way of saying that the king is coming. God will be king again. And so we should repent.

We should turn away from our selfish, foolish, destructive living and obey God. We will think more deeply about John's message in just a few minutes.

But let me just point out to you that this was Jesus' message too. In another gospel, in the gospel of Mark, in the first chapter, we read this. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, The time is fulfilled, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. Jesus picks up right where John left off. John, like Jesus after him, was a preacher of repentance.

John was also the fulfillment of prophecy. Just a few minutes ago, we heard Isaiah 40 read aloud. And it's quoted here in verse 3 of our text. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

[10:04] Matthew was telling us that John is the fulfillment of this Old Testament prophecy. He's the one who came crying out in the wilderness. He was getting ready for the coming of the king. He was like a herald, blowing a trumpet so everyone knew the king was about to arrive.

Well, if John was the fulfillment of prophecy, he was a prophet himself. Certainly the strangest part of our text is actually right there in verse 4. Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

What on earth? These details tell us more than meets the eye. Now, the food John was eating was actually pretty standard food for people who lived out in the desert.

Apparently locusts or grasshoppers are very high in protein. So those of you who are on a protein diet might want to give it some thought. The clothes are more important. Now keep your finger in Matthew chapter 3 and turn with me to the very end of the Old Testament, to the book of Malachi.

And we're not going to look at just Malachi. We're going to look at the very end of Malachi, the last two verses. It's Malachi chapter 4, verses 5 and 6. Malachi is talking about the coming day of the Lord.

[11:18] And look what he says in these last two verses. Well, we need to put Malachi together with 2 Kings 1-8, which actually describes Elijah.

It tells us that the prophet Elijah, this ancient prophet, wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist. Suddenly it all makes sense. John is making a political statement with his clothing.

He's dressing the part. He's not Elijah in the flesh. That's not what Malachi meant. But he is the prophet like Elijah, who will prepare the hearts of the people for the coming day of the Lord.

Now, Isaiah 40 is full of beautiful imagery of mountainous terrain being smoothed out to make a straight, level road for the coming of the king.

The valleys are lifted up, and the mountains are brought down. Several years ago, I took a trip to Nepal and spent some time hiking in the Himalayas. It's a land of towering mountains and deep gorges.

[12:32] I didn't climb any of the mountains, but I spent a lot of time hiking in the gorges. At one point, the group I was with decided to take a bus down out of the mountains. Now, it was the rainy season, the monsoon season, so the roads were in really terrible shape.

We would get on a bus, and we would drive for 30 minutes or an hour, and then we'd have to stop because a landslide would have blocked the road. We would get out of the bus. We'd climb over the landslide with boulders dropping around us, and then we'd catch another bus on the other side and keep going.

The roads were really bad. But even without the rain, the roads were pretty perilous. The road would run along this incredibly steep ravine, and each bus had a teenage boy, we called him the tap-tap boy, who would lean out the side of the bus and look over the edge.

And if the bus got too close to the edge, he would tap on the side of the bus so the driver knew to correct. Now, we could see burned-out hulks of buses that had fallen into the ravine before us, and so we knew that some tap-tap boys weren't quite fast enough.

It was the most difficult place I've ever traveled. Just getting anywhere was laborious and dangerous. Well, Isaiah 40 is a metaphor. The roads in Israel were fine.

[13:43] At least, they weren't the main obstacles to the coming of the king. No, the terrain that John came to smooth down was the rugged terrain of the human heart. The hearts of God's people were stony and barren.

They were as proud as the tallest mountains, as broken as a land crisscrossed by fissures and ravines. The hearts of God's people were not ready. Really, they'd never been ready to receive the king.

Now, John was a great man. A righteous man. He was a prophet. Someone that the authorities had to deal with and account for.

But he knew his place. Look again at verse 11. He says, Now, John knew that the one coming after him, Jesus, was infinitely greater.

They had the same message. They both had a kind of baptizing ministry. But Jesus was the point of the message. And his baptism was a baptism of the heart.

[14:57] Not just of the external body. John, this charismatic figure, this wilderness prophet, was really just a transitional figure. Just a herald to the king.

This brings us to our second question. What was John the Baptist's message? We've already started to answer it. His message can be summarized like this. The king is coming back any minute.

So make yourself ready. Repent. That word means just change your mind. It means turn away from this way you've been living. From a life devoted to sin and selfishness.

And begin at last to obey God. Now's the time. Do it before the king comes in his power to reign forever. When he comes, he's bringing justice with him. That means liberation and joy for those who turn to him in humble faith.

Yes. But it also means judgment on those who have defied him and rejected his rule. If you read through the gospels. Not just Matthew, but Mark and Luke and John.

[16:02] You'll find an awful lot about the coming of God's kingdom. And what's going to happen to the world when it comes. We see this in the story of Jesus' birth. If you've ever read the song that the pregnant Mary sings, the Magnificat.

About how God is going to level the arrogant oppressors. And raise up and fill the hungry faithful. He's going to turn the world upside down.

We see the kingdom coming in Jesus' ministry as he heals and confronts and opposes evil. The kingdom is really wherever Jesus is. And the whole Bible looks forward to the day when God's kingdom will finally come in its fullness.

When the true king, Jesus Christ, will rule with justice and mercy. And that's what John is talking about in verses 11 and 12. 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. John is saying that there will be a day of judgment.

[17:07] A new baptism. And some will be filled with joy by God's Holy Spirit. But others will be set apart for judgment. You know, there's of course a special urgency to this call to repentance on the eve of Jesus' own baptism and his coming into his public ministry.

But I think John's words apply to us as well. I mean, John didn't say it like this, but we can say that we are part of the Christmas story too. In fact, we're in the very middle of it.

It begins with Christ's birth, but it won't finally end until Jesus returns to complete his work. The peace on earth we long for and we sing about won't really be ours until then.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus teaches just a few chapters after this in Matthew chapter 6, we pray, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We're praying that all people, including us, would recognize God's rule.

That we would honor him completely, as fully and completely as the angels in heaven do. This prayer is answered in the hearts of Christians now. But it won't be fully answered until Jesus comes again to set everything right.

[18:22] And we are still waiting for that day. Well, what will that day look like? What will happen when God's rule is finally and fully established? We will be established. I don't know that human experience can really tell us what that's like.

We get maybe hints. Maybe this is a hint. On April 11, 1945, four U.S. soldiers arrived at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

The guards had already fled. Later, one of the soldiers described his experience. This is what he wrote. He said, My, but it was a great day.

For the guards, the approach of the U.S. Army meant judgment for all they had done. And they knew to flee. For the captives, for the oppressed, it meant life and joy.

I'm certainly not trying to suggest that in any sense, the U.S. Army is the kingdom of heaven. Or for that, for that matter, any other human institution. It's not.

[19:51] But this is maybe just a picture of what it looks like when even a human measure of justice is restored. Do you long for God's justice to come?

I mean that seriously. Think about it. God's justice means joy and freedom and peace. I mean the Christmas story, the Jesus story is the happiest of all stories.

It's the stories of God's breaking into this cold, broken world. God with us. God for us. Of course the angels call it the good news of great joy when he tells the shepherds.

God with us. But it also means that all of us will have to answer for what we've done. What do you think your life looks like to God? If you're like me, you're not entirely comfortable with a thought.

What else is there for us to do but repent? Now if we do repent, we know that God will receive us with forgiveness and love. By turning away from our life of sin and trusting the king that was willing to die for us, we can have new eternal life in the kingdom.

[21:02] But now is the time to prepare. Now John is not the only one who emphasizes the need for preparation. Jesus does this too. He preaches the same message.

In Matthew 24, in Matthew 25, he gives a series of parables. These are short stories meant to illustrate a point. And the point of all the ones we're going to look at in just a moment are to prepare for the coming of the king.

Now we're not going to read them all. That might take too long. But it might be a useful thing to do after church. But I want to quickly run through them. So turn to Matthew 24 with me. Matthew chapter 24 and look at verse 45.

Matthew 24, 45. Jesus says, Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has set over his household to give them their food at the proper time?

Jesus imagines a scenario in which a master leaves and puts one of his servants in charge of everyone else in the house. Now in one case, the servant is faithful. In the other though, the servant is greedy and selfish and even abuses the other servants.

[22:08] What will be their reward when the master returns? Look on to Matthew 25, verses 1 through 13. This is called the parable of the ten virgins. Ten young women are waiting up late for the bridegroom to come home so they can have a party.

Some planned ahead and brought extra oil for their lamps so their lamps wouldn't run out. But others forgot to plan ahead and had to run out and buy some more oil. And they end up missing the wedding feast entirely.

Or look at the parable of the talents in verses 14 through 29. A talent was a very significant amount of money. So there's a man who hands over his fortune to his servants while he's away. And some of the servants invest their shares well.

They work hard. They're faithful. And they're rewarded when he returns. But one servant is slothful. And he does nothing at all with the treasure that his master has given him.

And when the master comes back, the faithful servants are rewarded. But the spiteful, unfaithful servant is cast out into the darkness. Now Jesus tells these parables all to make basically the same point.

[23:16] The significance of our choices in life will only be fully and finally revealed when the master returns to settle accounts. Now is the time to prepare. Get ready.

Repent. Turn away from your old way of living. So our third question then is what should we do about this? Well, repent and prepare, we've said.

But what does that actually look like in your life, in my life? That's the most important question we can ask of this text. This story about a wild prophet in the wilderness thousands of years ago is meant to have practical application for you right now.

Well, first, repentance looks like a changed heart. I think it's important that we read John's words in Matthew 3 in light of Jesus' words in Mark 1.

The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel. Repentance in the biblical sense doesn't just mean feeling sorry for the things you've done.

[24:21] Wrong. It means turning from them and embracing the promises of God. Jesus says, believe in the gospel, the good news. Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection makes salvation possible for us.

It's through faith in him that we can be forgiven of our sins and we can become brothers and sisters with Christ and children of God. And as that happens, we're given a new heart that enables us to love in the way that we're meant to love.

We know this change of heart happens when God's Holy Spirit works in us. That's what John means when he talks about Jesus baptizing in the Holy Spirit. But that's not a call for us to wait. It's a call to hear God's invitation to be freed from your slavery to sin and to live eternally as God's beloved child.

A change of heart. Well, second, listening to John's words means bearing fruit. The Bible often uses the image of a fruit tree to talk about the results of people's lives.

How do you tell a good fruit tree from a bad fruit tree? Well, it's really pretty simple. You just taste the fruit. I grew up in Southern California and in the back of our house we had an incredible lemon tree that every year would produce hundreds of the most beautiful lemons.

[25:38] I would make lemonade all summer. We also had some lime trees that did nothing. Didn't produce a thing. They ought to have been torn down. Well, people are like fruit trees.

They bring forth good fruit and bad fruit. Think about your relationships. Do you bring peace and love with you to your relationships?

Or do you bring anger and strife? Think about how you spend your money. Do you use it to bless others? Think about your speech.

Think about your speech. When your mouth opens, do words of truth and love issue out? Or words of falsehood and hate? In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul gives us two lists of different kinds of fruit that can come from our life.

I'd like to read them both aloud and just let you think for a moment about your own life. Ask yourself, which fruit is my life bringing forth? This is what Paul writes. Now the works of the flesh are evident.

[26:50] Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

I warn you as I warned you before that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Now I imagine that all of us have some of these in our lives at least some of the time. And none of us exhibit all of these fruits of the Spirit all of the time. But are you bringing them forth more and more in increasing measure?

Prepare yourself by examining your heart and repenting of the bad fruit. And seek by God's grace to grow in these fruits of the Spirit. So you'll be ready when the King comes.

Third, I want us to notice John's strong words especially to the religious. The Pharisees and the Sadducees both come to see John. We see that in verse 7.

[28:08] When he, John, 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.

And 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. Now that is strong language. It's interestingly almost the exact same thing that Jesus says to the Pharisees in Matthew 12.

Almost word for word. The Pharisees were a group of very devout Jews who were especially careful to keep God's law. And they were very popular amongst the ordinary people. The Sadducees were a different group.

They were the religious elite. They controlled the temple in Jerusalem. They had a reputation for corruption and were not popular with the people. We don't really know about what their motivations were for coming to see John, but it doesn't appear to have been good.

It doesn't seem that they came to repent. John calls them a brood of vipers. He says you're like a den of deadly poisonous snakes destroying people.

[29:18] They're not bringing forth the good fruit that God wants to see. Even though they're very religious. They're the most visibly religious people around. But they were not trusting in God's promises.

Look at what John says in verse 9. I think that gives us a key to what they're thinking. He says don't presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father. In other words, God's not very interested in your family tree.

He isn't just looking for the right kind of people from the right kind of families. The faith of your parents and grandparents and great-great-grandparents doesn't seem to do much for you.

God actually cares about how you live. He wants to see the fruit that comes from your heart. Now maybe some of you are biological descendants of Abraham. I suspect that most of us here come from religious families.

Maybe you're a diligent rule keeper. Don't be content with that. Don't let your heart be proud and self-sufficient. I think I probably excel most of you in religious pedigree.

[30:22] My father's a pastor. And I actually lived for four years in a house in our church parking lot. I lived at church. That didn't change my heart. Only hearing and obeying this call to repentance.

This call to repent and believe in the good news. Could ever prepare me for the coming of the kingdom. Now as we step back and look at the whole story of Christmas.

We see that it's about the arrival of a long-awaited king who is going to set everything right. He brings the promise of life and peace. But he calls us to turn away from selfish and rebellious living.

So is this Jesus a lion or a lamb? Maybe the most unexpected thing about the Christmas story about Jesus is that he's both at the same time.

He is the lion who became a lamb out of love for you. The God of heaven. The commander of angelic armies. Who becomes a baby in a poor family.

[31:25] In a backwater town. And one day will allow wicked men to strip him naked and execute him on a cross. The lion and the lamb.

And then he rises from the dead in glory. Christmas takes us to Easter. And now we can say with great confidence and joy that he is lion for us. And lamb for us.

The Christmas story of which we are a part is drawing speedily to its conclusion. The son of God has been here once. And he's promised to come back and finish the job.

In the words of the hymn. Let every heart prepare him room. Let's pray. Father we confess our sins to you.

And we ask that you would help us. Strengthen us by your spirits. That we might turn away from them. And trust in Christ. We thank you that Christ's kingdom is coming.

[32 : 35] And in fact is already here in part. We ask that you would continue to establish your justice and peace. We pray that your will would be done in our hearts.

And in our relationships. And in our community. Prepare us each now for the day when we will meet Christ our king. And it is in his name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Would you stand as we sing our hymn of response.

about the coming of our great King.