**December 8, 2019 Matthew 3:1-12**

***BORN the KING: The Kingdom of Heaven is Near***

**Scripture: *Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV***

*(1)In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, (2)"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (3)This 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.'" (4)Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (5)Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, (6)and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (7)But 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? (8)Bear fruit worthy of repentance. (9)Do 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. (10)Even 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. (12)His 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."*

“*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:19 NRSV)*

*“This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'… and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Matthew 11:10&14 NRSV*

*(11)… "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; (12)but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased…. Matthew 17:11-13 NRSV*

**Notes:**

1. The ***wilderness*** seems like an odd place for a new beginning.
   1. The people did not realize how ***close*** the kingdom of heaven was.
   2. Revival is renewing our commitment with ***vigor***.
   3. God chooses wilderness places to ***birth*** new life.
   4. God wants to do a new thing in our ***life***.
2. This passage is about The New ***Exodus***
   1. John’s words are a call for ***change***.
   2. God welcomes all people who desire to ***serve*** him.
3. John the Baptist enters as the new ***Elijah***
   1. Prophets are ***truth*** ***tellers***, called by God to tell others
   2. What is most important are ***repentance*** and ***grace***.
   3. Repentance means ***stepping*** ***away*** from the old sinful ways and ***turning*** ***to*** the ways of God.
   4. Bear the fruit of repentance; embodied in the way we live, ***every*** ***day***, as God’s people.
4. Advent is a time of entering into Our Own ***Wilderness***
   1. New life comes in unexpected ***places*** by unexpected ***people***.
   2. There is ***truth*** to be told; there is life to be ***revealed***.
   3. God is creating new children out of us and ***new*** ***life*** is being born all around us.
   4. What kind of people are you being called to be?

**Transcript:**

A few weeks ago, I shared with you about my trip to Pikes Peak. On that same vacation trip we traveled from Colorado to Arizona. In Arizona we spent some time with family. In the housing development where we were staying, we enjoyed air conditioning, lush green lawns, thanks to automatic sprinkling systems and security. But we didn’t travel to Arizona to hide in a gated community; we traveled there to see the sites. To see the beauty that surrounds Phoenix, the wildlife and plant life; nature in its rawest form. We traveled to the Grand Canyon, looked at the giant expanse and we realized just how small we truly are. We could sense how weak we are in comparison to God’s power, who created this canyon and the beauty it held. We traveled into the desert, Apache Junction if I remember correctly, to what seemed like a wasteland where little grew; where many have lost their life in search for treasure; a place where there seemed to be nothing but death. I was amazed at its magnitude. But as I looked closely and focused on what lay before me, I realized that there was life there. It may not have been life as I was accustomed to seeing it here in Bedford county, but there was life just the same.

We all travel to places and fail to see what really lies before us; life that is so close that we could reach out and touch it. And yet we do not even see it. We look and see the barrenness of our world. We look and see the hopelessness all around us, and we fail to see the hope that is right in front of us. Life shows up in unexpected places. Life shows up in unexpected ways, and many times it is closer to us than we could ever have imagined.

So many people feel as if they are wandering around in that desert. They feel as if they are struggling to keep moving forward, struggling to see what really lies before them. Their only desire is for a little relief, a cool drink of water for their dry parched throats.

Today our passage takes us to the edge of the wilderness. There we find a wild looking man declaring that the Lord is near, that the kingdom of Heaven is at hand, that we need to be prepared. Stand with me as we read from Matthew 3:1-12

*(1)In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, (2)"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (3)This 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.'" (4)Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (5)Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, (6)and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (7)But 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? (8)Bear fruit worthy of repentance. (9)Do 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. (10)Even 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. (12)His 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." (Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV)*

The vast, hostile wilderness seems like an odd place for a new beginning. We don’t always think of vast, dry desert areas, as being a place for new things to begin, and if these things do take root, we do not expect them to grow and flourish; yet that is what we see here in the text.

Crowds are gathering to see what’s going on at the Jordan River. There is a bit of a ruckus going on and everybody is talking about it. A prophet proclaiming news of the Messiah. John the Baptist has emerged from the wilderness. He is quite a site to see with his heavy camel’s hair outer garments, cinching it with what I imagine is a large leather belt; surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. I can imagine his gritty smile with grasshopper legs between his teeth and the smell of that camel hair outfit giving many something to talk about.

John is proclaiming the news of what is to come; the need for revival. Many would hear his word and believe; they would repent and be baptized. Others would stand on the shore and listen speculating; was he another loud mouth prophet, proclaiming something that has been promised years ago but is not likely to come any time soon. These people weren’t quite so convinced. And then there were those who stood on the shore contemplating. They didn’t like the crowds hearing what he was saying. They were looking for ways to silence him and get everything back to the way it was.

As for revival that is what John is talking about; the people did not realize how close the kingdom of heaven was to them. Jesus was on his way, that is if he isn’t already there, and John knew just how close he was. Revival is remembering the commitment that we have made and renewing that commitment with vigor, fervor and determination. The people were in need of a refreshing reminder; a reminder of the God who has loved them from the beginning, a reminder of the God they presumably loved and followed; a reminder of the Messiah that God had promised; a messiah who would come to set his people free; a messiah who would redeem this nation of Israel.

In the midst of the wilderness, something new is happening. We’ve seen it throughout the story of Scripture; Abraham leaving Ur for the new land God has promised Him. Joseph being taken to Egypt only to be used to save Israel during the famine. Moses receiving a call from God in the wilderness; the people of God being delivered from Pharaoh’s hand and continually being provided for in the wilderness. God sending a message to his people through the prophet Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:19 NRSV)

Throughout the span of Scripture God’s hand and provision have been present even in the harshest places, the most barren lands. In church history, we see mothers and fathers who intentionally travel to places of wilderness, to deepen their faith with God; mystics who meditate, pray, and write, who call the church to be who we are supposed to be; and challenge us to step out on faith in pursuit of God’s call in our life.

While most spend time avoiding wilderness places and spaces in our hearts and lives, it appears that, while the wilderness is seemingly barren, these are the very grounds on which God chooses to birth new life. These are the places where He reveals himself to us. Here in today’s text, we are again in a wilderness. We are not in a synagogue, not in a temple, not in a city; but we are at the edge of a river in a barren land. Standing before the people is a man with wild hair and crazy clothes, and he is crying out to the onlookers, those would listen, “Something new is happening. Someone is coming. Repent! Be ready! Be ready for this new thing that God is doing!” Things haven’t changed much over the years. We still need to hear the news that God is doing something in our very midst. God wants to do a new thing in our world and in our life.

God has said in the past and in several different places, behold I am about to do a new thing. **This passage is about The New Exodus.** This passage has sometimes been referred to as ushering in the new exodus. It takes place in the wilderness. We know that the wilderness was a big image in the exodus. Moses was called in the wilderness. The people wandered in the wilderness for forty years. There is a connection between the forty years of wilderness wandering and the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, which occurs shortly after today’s text. The number is so significant that we use it for our own wanderings, we use it for our own spiritual journeys; moving into a new place, and away from the old.

John’s words to the Pharisees and Sadducees could be seen as a criticism. Criticism of their thinking they had all their theology correct. It could also be seen as a call for change; change that needs to happen because of what’s coming. The reference to Abraham and creating children from stones is directly stating that God can make new children if God wants. While the children of Israel were the chosen ones before, God is creating a new people and he welcomes all people who desire to serve him.

This new exodus is to be led by the Messiah. The baptism represents a passage through the new Red Sea. A cleansing of sorts from our old way of life into this new one. Through this journey they will be formed into the new people of God, and it will be evident by them following the Messiah.

**John the Baptist, represents the new Elijah.** The reference to John the Baptist’s clothes is not mentioned for the shock and awe. His clothing is mentioned so that we connect him to Elijah, the Old Testament prophet described in 2 Kings 1:8 as, “*A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist*.” (2 Kings 1:8 NRSV) Elijah served God faithfully, and John would as well. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus directly refers to John *as* Elijah, “*This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'… and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Matthew 11:10&14 NRSV* and then again later on, “*(11)… "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; (12)but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased…. Matthew 17:11-13 NRSV*

We often place the title of “fortune teller” on the backs of prophets, and while many of them foretell the events that will take place, what they really are is truth tellers, they see the world for what it is and reveal what is wrong; they see the elephant in the room and are called by God to speak up and tell others about it.

John reveals several issues here for the people to confront; an attitude, that what they do doesn’t matter because they are the children of Abraham. John makes it clear when he speaks directly to the Pharisees and Sadducees present that God can create children whenever he likes. He can produce them from whatever and whomever he wants. Lineage is not what saves us, our pedigree is not what draws us to him; it is not the fact that we attended church here our entire lives; or that our parents are significant benefactors to the financial needs of the church. What is most important are repentance and grace; turning away from what we do that is wrong, and accepting from God what we do not truly deserve.

The kingdom of heaven is near, literally; repentance is needed Repentance doesn’t just mean to seek forgiveness; it means a completely new way of thinking, it means stepping away from the old sinful ways and turning to the ways of God. People entangled in the idea that law, theology, and lineage save them, are going to need new eyes. They need to be looking for the new way Jesus offers. Bear the fruit of repentance. It isn’t enough to give lip service to this baptism, it isn’t enough to give thought to this new way of living; it must be embodied in the way we live, everyday, as God’s people.

There will be a division of people: those who repent and follow (the wheat); and those who don’t (the chaff). John the Baptist reveals a new way of living, pointing those present towards Jesus, preparing a path for him to enter into our world.

We must be e**ntering into our own wilderness.** Advent is a time for us to enter into our own wilderness places; the places we avoid or don’t want to confront, places we need to cultivate and look for new growth. Just as a new thing was happening in the wilderness of our text, new things are happening all around us, new things are happening here at the Ryot Church of the Nazarene, new things are happening in Bedford County, and new things are happening in us, if we just take the time to look deep within the events that are going on in our midst.

New life comes in unexpected places and is ushered in by unexpected people. The wilderness was a place people feared, and it ended up being a place of preparation for the Messiah. It became a place of new life, new hope, and the beginning of a new people of God being formed. Our lives might feel like we are in the wilderness right now. It might be scary and untamed; desolate even; but that doesn’t mean it is abandoned.

There is truth to be told, there is life to be revealed. Even now God is creating new children, not out of rocks but out of us; and new life is being born all around us, if we have eyes to see. The first step is repentance, seeing with new eyes. What areas in your lives need new eyes? How can you look at the events going on around you differently?

Once you see things with new eyes, you must bear the fruit of that repentance. What needs to change in your lives? What attitudes need to change; what habits need to change; what lifestyles and relationships need to change? What kind of people are you being called to be?

We are called to be the children of God. God did not call rocks to be his children; God called us. What does it look like for us to be the children of God? We are part of this new kingdom that Jesus ushered in. What does a citizen of the kingdom of God look like? How can we live like citizens of that kingdom? It looks like the things we have been called to; serving the people arounds us, here in our surrounding communities. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked; visiting the lonely, sick and imprisoned; housing the homeless, meeting the needs of those whose needs are not being met. But most of all, sharing the message of Jesus to those who do not know. You do not need to look far to find somebody who is in need. But when you do, you need to act.