

January 15, 2022  
Matthew 3:1-17  
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### **A Fresh Start**

Last Sunday's passage ended with the magi heading home by another way, all because of a dream. Joseph then has a dream too, urging him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt away from Herod's dangerous plans to eradicate each and every child who might pose a threat to his shaky hold on the throne. After a time, God speaks to Joseph in dreams again, guiding him to bring the little family back from Egypt. They settle in Nazareth in the region of Galilee. In Matthew we hear nothing about Jesus as a child or a teenager. The next voice we hear belongs to John the Baptizer, or John the Baptist who preaches repentance by the Jordan river and announces the coming of the Messiah. [Read Matthew 3:1-17]

Oh, John. Grumpy, cranky, fiery John. The quiet if less-than-dreamy dreams have come to an end, and John the Baptist's disruptive daytime visions have taken their place. It is easy for me to wonder if John is simply hangry after months or even years of living off bugs dipped in honey while wearing scratchy clothes in the wilderness. And every preacher worth her salt loves to shout about broods of vipers. John the Baptist is more than a caricature, however, more than the mascot of a different kind of Christian. His invitation—rough as it may sound—is a call to a different way of living, a holy call to a different life.

John is in the wilderness preaching repentance. And throngs of people are streaming out of the surrounding villages, responding to the word he offers. This word speaks to something the people are hungry for—craving even—which explains why they come by the hundreds, even thousands. The religious leaders come, too. Matthew does not tell us why the Pharisees and Sadducees join the others in streaming toward John. Maybe they are curious; maybe they are nervous; maybe they want to stop John or rein him in. For many of us, the titles of Pharisees and

Sadducees are code words for the villains in the gospel. These religious leaders are more complicated than that, but it is clear that John has his opinions. These religious leaders are the ones John calls a “brood of vipers,” after all. And yet, his message is for everyone within earshot—including us: *Repent! A new age is upon us!* Or as the Common English Bible reads, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”<sup>1</sup>

John could be heard as an early extreme version of what writer Kendra Adachi calls a “goal guru.” These are the voices that grow louder this time of year, the ones who enter the new year with what she calls “Big Black Trash Bag Energy.”<sup>2</sup> That kind of energy is seductive shouting the life-changing, even life-saving promise of a clean house, a new planner, a whole list of SMART goals, a healthy pantry, a dry January, with a desk and a kitchen and a closet and a bank account that could be mistaken for a photo from *Real Simple* magazine. We drink water; we count our steps; we go to bed early. Out with the bad—in big black trash bags—and in with the good. A clean slate, a new beginning. It. Is. Lovely. While it lasts. And then by Valentine’s Day we are pretty sure we have failed, so if we start again, we begin with Lent or with summer or with back-to-school or with a birthday. And each time we start over we convince ourselves that this time it will be different because WE will be different.

And then we meet Jesus. We hear nothing about Big Black Trash Bags, nothing about our waistlines or our bedtimes or our SMART goals. Matthew tells us nothing of Jesus’ childhood or adolescence. Jesus’ first out-loud words in Matthew’s gospel insist that yes, he wants John to baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness.” *Righteousness* is one of those very stern-sounding, bible-y words. When we hear it, we may flinch, associating it with self-righteousness, smugness, and holier-than-thou behavior. And yet, righteousness points first and foremost not to a fresh set

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:2, CEB

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/start23>

of labels for our junk drawer or the latest HIIT workout but to right relationship. Jesus comes to restore humanity's relationship with God and with one another.

Throughout the biblical narrative we have heard stories of humans promising to follow where God leads and do all that God asks **and** stories of humans failing spectacularly in following and doing as we have promised. And we have heard stories about the ways God calls us to change, to follow, to try again to follow faithfully. The coming of Jesus is God's most extravagant and even outlandish attempt to show us how deeply God loves and treasures us. In Jesus we meet God face-to-face. In Jesus we see just how much God adores us and wants to be in relationship with us. It is lovely and hopeful and beautiful, and it is hard. Because God sends John, too, of course. The call to repentance is a genuine call, an appeal to us to turn from all that promises easy answers, from all that we cling to for security, from all that holds us down, from all that urges us to look out for number one, to trample any who get in our way, to denigrate all who differ from us.

In the past I have been tempted to write John off. I heard his scathing words about broods of vipers and fiery punishments as Big Black Trash Bag energy to the extreme. I don't like the idea of eternal torment for anyone really, even if there are days when I'd like to sign some people up or send them there myself. But now I hear John's words differently. I hear him insisting that God expects transformation from me, true turning from the ways of selfishness, hatred, violence, and greed, AND that God does not leave me or us on our own to transform ourselves. Yes, there is much I need to change, quite a bit I need to let go of, enough to fill multiple warehouses with Big Black Trash Bags. And yet, Jesus meets me where I am and begins sorting me out, not simply on January 1, but each moment of every day. *Great is thy faithfulness,*

the hymn tells us, *there is no shadow of turning with thee.*<sup>3</sup> God never turns God's back on us. Instead, in loving us face to face, in showing us mercy first, the God we meet in Jesus empowers *us* to turn, to repent, to start anew, "to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world."

You'll see those same words in your bulletin this morning and you will hear them again in a few weeks when we welcome new members. Our confirmands are working with all three of this morning's questions as they study and wonder and wrestle with what it means to answer these questions for themselves. It is a great and gracious thing that the Baptism of the Lord shows up around the beginning of each new year, because it is a powerful reminder that God is not looking to put us in a Big Black Trash Bag and toss us out with uneaten crusts of bread or empty milk cartons or that overflowing collection of mason jars on my pantry shelf. Instead God asks us to turn, to change our hearts and minds. It's not a once and done. It's a lifelong calling, to keep listening, to keep turning, to keep starting anew.

My friend and colleague Becca Messman writes about a time when she wound up in the emergency room with an infected bee sting:

While I sat there on the faux leather seats, I was berating myself for ignoring it for so long and congratulating myself for finally doing something about it. All around the room there were different people pretending to watch Food Network on the muffled TV but really focusing on their discomfort, speculating, like those in prison, about "what other people were in for." An elderly woman coughed alone in the corner. A baby yelped and squirmed between washed out parents. A businessman barked into his cell phone, informing colleagues at work that he'd be late to meetings, if he'd be there at all. He had

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<sup>3</sup> "Great is Thy Faithfulness"

to get a follow-up the next day at 9, so staff meeting was out. We had all heard every word. He seemed to need an audience for his inconvenience.

With each name that was called, there was a shared sense of hope that someone was steps closer to feeling better, and that meant everyone else was a step closer to their turn. At one point, the elderly woman was audibly leaving a message on her church's answering machine, this is at 8 pm, seeing if anyone would be able to pick her up and take her home that night. Could they call her back, please? She'd leave her cell phone on, which she never did, she laughed, to whom she did not know. And what followed brought me to tears.

The businessman seemed to be eavesdropping like I was. Not that the woman was being quiet. But he visibly reacted to her words. He was leaving with his discharge paperwork, but then, he turned around. He tentatively spoke to the elderly woman, and it seemed like he was offering her a ride home or to pay for a cab for her. I don't know whether she took him up on it. I don't know what happened in him to cause him to do that. But I haven't been shake the image. He turned around. [*He turned around.*] And I would venture a guess that the rest of us in that nighttime waiting room changed our [hearts and] minds too.<sup>4</sup>

God does not always call to us in thundering, fist-pounding rants from fiery prophets like John. In fact, I am convinced that God rarely calls to us in that way. Yes, John's urgency is warranted and holy. Jesus will soon call out with an urgency and fire of his own. But day in and day out, I am convinced that God still calls, calls us back, calls us to turn around, calls us to let go of all that we clench in our fists, calls us to release all that causes us to grit our teeth. This call is quite

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<sup>4</sup> In her paper for The Well in 2014

often a steady whisper, a constant hum. On occasion this call comes in the voice of another human being stuck hoping for a ride in a waiting room. In worship each week this call comes every time we splash water in the font. This invitation reminds us that God's mercy comes first—not Big Black Trash Bags. *God's mercy comes first.* This water declares the abundant and persistent grace that seeks us out, enabling us to confess all that we cling to and all that clings to us. And by the grace of God, we can then hear God's voice drowning out all the others, proclaiming that we too are God's beloved children in this and every season. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.