

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
December 7, 2025

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. 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.

"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. 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

This is an ancient story that's among my favorites.

Two monks were returning to the monastery in the evening after a long walk through the woods. They came to the bank of a narrow river, where they found a well-dressed and rather cross-looking older woman. She was unable to cross the river. The monks approached her and asked if she would like to be carried to the other side. "Of course," she responded haughtily.

They lifted her and began to carry her across the river. About halfway, the younger monk briefly lost his footing on a slippery stone. The woman berated him and struck him with her umbrella. "Watch your step!" she said. "What's the matter with you?" The monks got her to the other side in safety and bid her good-day, continuing their walk back to the monastery.

The younger monk said nothing for a long while. Finally he spoke. "Can you believe she behaved that way?" The older monk said nothing. "How could she be like that? We were being kind." The older monk waited a moment and said, "My friend, we left her on the other side of the river a half-hour ago. Why are you are still carrying her?"

I think of this beautiful story today because it's a story about putting down all of those things that burden us and hold us back. It's a story about leaving behind anything that blocks us and numbs us; anything that might keep us from ultimate flourishing. It's a story, in other words, about that rare gift called *detachment*. And I think of it today because the teacher, prophet and disciple we know as John the Baptist might just be the ultimate model of detachment, enough that we hear from him every year at this time for two weeks straight; enough that all four evangelists bring the model of his life vividly to life, a rare "clean sweep" across the four gospels. John's story is an eye-popping and ultimately deeply poignant series of detachments, of moments in which John had to

leave behind, to put down by the side of the river, to *shed* as he grew ever more in the devotion, faithfulness and integrity that so characterize him.

And it all begins with family, maybe the hardest detachment of all. His parents Elizabeth and Zechariah, both prophets themselves, were quite old when John was born; old enough that John would have to leave behind any notion of family life by the time he was in what we would call middle school. John spent something in the range of twenty years in the desert, in the wilderness, a place that on its own demands a constant flow of shedding, the leaving behind of comforts, of whatever security one might have hoped to feel in the first-century Mediterranean world. Was John taken in at some point by a community of desert monks? How did he survive? Whatever got him through, it was nothing like those attachments and places of comfort that we all take for granted — and that can at times, we know, hold us back. He shed those as he lived the life of devotion and steadfastness his mother and father had so lovingly prepared for him.

And while we know little of John's twenty years in the wilderness, we do know what we have in front of us today. John, as we see and hear so palpably, chose to leave behind and to shed any trace of coziness he might have achieved with his colleagues, with the institution that might have given him cover or security. Leaders are coming to him, we're told, seeking him. John sees them as cozy, self-satisfied in their inherited status and rank. John believes their lives and commitments and the choices they make ought to reflect God's will, the Spirit's guiding; at the very least, they should be living out the principles they're teaching. But they're not. And so John sheds *them* and all they might mean to him, calling them, yes, a brood of vipers, and comparing them to trees that no longer bear fruit or leaves, that no longer fulfill God's purpose for them. Not the way to *climb the ladder* needless to say. John is happy to shed this ladder, to leave it behind. John is through all of this devoting himself to God just as Elizabeth and Zechariah knew he would. And that means detaching from all else that might hold him back from life with God, from the life God longs for him to lead.

Today's gospel shows us one more thing, and it's eye-popping indeed. What else is John willing to shed? What else do we see him leaving behind? Remarkably, John is willing to give up all that he's built over a lifetime as he does something nobody ever does: he sheds, in essence, his own career. And it's quite a career. We're told that "the people of Jerusalem and *all Judea and all the region along the Jordan* were going out to him, confessing their sins and being baptized." That's a lot of people. John was, at the very least, enormously popular. And what did he do? He shed it all. He shed his considerable success and fame. He left it behind. He said to those thousands upon thousands of followers: "I want the best for you and the best, as it turns out, is *not me*. It's the one who has come, whose way I prepare and whose name is Jesus. *You need to go to him*. I'm able to baptize you with water. But he can give you so much more. He will baptize and fill you with the Holy Spirit. Go to him."

And so John sheds family, community, followers, fame, security, all for one reason: so that he can follow God more closely, so that he can fulfill the hopes of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and the promises of God; so that he can point toward freedom, release, hope, liberation, reconciliation, new life. And that brings us, my friends, to the heartbeat of today, right here, 2025, the second Sunday in Advent, the season just begun of increasing light and hope, of return, and, finally, of shedding because, yes, John is inviting us to shed too. We hear it in his words to us today. Repent!

he says, in his raw, urgent tone, because the kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom promise, has come near. And what does he mean? The word he uses has a synonym, and it might not be the one we think. To repent is to return. It isn't to wallow. It isn't to despair. It's to turn and to return. To come home. *Return*, John urges us — return to the God from whom you've wandered. And no matter how far you've wandered. God has prepared an eternal home for you that has come near. Turn. Return. The old grudges that are so well-rehearsed: turn. Put them down and return. The old habits that have never been life-giving and still aren't: turn. Leave them by the side of the river and come home.

And then, finally, John says, bear fruit. Fruit worthy of that turning and that homecoming. Leave behind the cozying up, the self-satisfaction. The one who brings mercy, peace, justice and love is on the way. Prepare now to meet him in acts of mercy, justice and love of our own. This is the fruit that comes from turning. the fruit that comes from living the lives for which we were created. Living the lives, each of us, and all of us, together, that is God's deepest desire for us. John's language is raw. It's tough and it's bracing. But here's what it's saying. God won't let us stay in the dark. God won't let us keep living half awake, numb, self-deceived. As a wise colleague likes to say, God won't let us stop him from healing what's broken in us. It's a healing John calls refining, winnowing, and it's going to ask that we turn, that we consider what we might shed, put down by the river, leave behind. We put it down to breathe again. We put it down to be awakened. We put it down to live. Thanks be to God. Amen.