

## **“Called to the Riverside”**

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### **II Advent – 7 & 8 December 2019**

This week, as we light another candle and move another step closer to the coming of Christ into the world, we find ourselves washed in the words of God’s prophets. The prophet Isaiah speaks to us of new life growing from barren roots, of one who is to come whose delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. Isaiah opens for us a window into the righteousness of God, a kingdom ruled by peace and justice, a dwelling place where innocence and unity reign. The prophet John, cousin of Jesus, cries out in the wilderness, calling the people of God to repentance and renewal. This message, this preparation that John preaches is too urgent, too great to concern himself with appearances or decorum. The kingdom of heaven has come near!

The kingdom of heaven, the place where lions and lambs lie down together, where little children play among snakes without fear, the reign of peace approaches. What incredible, wonderful news! The promises of God are being fulfilled, and we are being called by a voice in the wilderness to prepare ourselves as witnesses!

But first. First. That voice in the wilderness cries Repent. Repent. This invitation, this demand. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. John has been called out of the desert to make straight the path, to prepare the way of the Lord. John has emerged from the wild to call us to this season of Advent, of anticipation. We are not only being called to a season of silent waiting, of countdowns and expectation. John is spending his advent season on the banks of the Jordan. He is calling us to meet him there.

The people of Jerusalem, the holy city, and the people of all the land along the Jordan heard of a man in rough clothing proclaiming strange things, and they came to see him for themselves.

They heard that a voice like that of the prophets of history was calling for renewal, for the confession of sins and the renewal of mind, body, and spirit, and they could not keep it to themselves. News of this homeless stranger spread like the wildfire in his preaching, and even the Pharisees and the Sadducees sought him out.

John looks on these religious leaders, these future critics and accusers of Jesus, and perceives the hardness of their hearts, their unwillingness to hear the truth that is coming to save them. John sees how much of their faith is simply performance, a method of maintaining status and political safety. He greets them with a piercing stare and a challenge. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

John challenges the powerbrokers of religion to examine their actions, their choices and their words. Do not presume. God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. The God that is calling to these people through the voice of John does not prioritize based on class, or economic status, or lineage, or birthplace. Neither does this God turn away those whose hearts cry out for him. John does not refuse baptism even to those he calls the brood of vipers. John does not deny them the opportunity to repent. In fact, it is to this very group that John foretells the coming of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Son of God. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are the ones to whom John says “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” The very people who will reject Christ are among the first to hear of his Advent. John begs even these to repent, that they might embrace God’s forgiveness when he comes among them.

This might not sound like the other miracle stories, but it is one. The miracle of this story is that at the very moment that John is proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of heaven, the Lord of All is walking the earth. As John baptizes his fellow sinners in the water, the one who is to come

is already on his way to the river's edge. The repentance that John calls for is not a fearful effort at earning the love of an absent God. John is rinsing the eyes and softening the hearts of those who will see the love of God face to face, those who will be touched and healed and saved by God made man. John believes that he is not worthy to carry the sandals of the Messiah. The miracle is that John is right, and the Messiah comes to him anyway.

The kind of Advent season that the prophet is calling us to doesn't fit very neatly into 25 slots, and I think it's safe to say Hallmark will never make a movie starring John the Baptist. We live in a fearful world, and many of us look forward to this season of light and life and family all year as a respite from the darkness all around. We are living in the wilderness, or you might say the wilderness is within us. Our interior life is crowded with shopping lists and traffic jams and opportunities to consume and crave and construct. Our sights are set on the end of the calendar, on the last lighted candle, on the joyful reunions and the grateful unwrappings. But in a breath, a blink, those moments are past. We dive back into the wilderness, wading through the thicket of nostalgia. The path winds on endlessly, in some places barely visible. A voice cries out to us. We turn, as we are listening, to see a path, straight and clear. There is the sound of rushing water, the voices of people praying.

Would you go down to the river? Would you listen to the ravings of a holy man half starved? You are being called there even now. The kingdom of heaven has come near. The Lord is on the riverbank. Will you be there to greet him?