

SERMON
+ 3 Advent A
December 14, 2025

What did you go out to see?
Jesus asks the crowd that question
about that time they went out to the Jordan wilderness
to be baptized with a baptism of repentance by John.

What did you expect? he asks.
Someone blown about by the whims of popularity?
Someone who struts his own power and wealth?
Of course not!

You went out into the wilderness
to see a prophet of God
in wilderness clothes,
living a wilderness existence.

And you went out to him
because he called you in all seriousness
to prepare the way for the messiah
by making a way within yourself.
That was John's very important and specific duty.

Jesus reminds the crowd about this critical importance of John
because he has to assure the crowd
that they had indeed done the right thing,
that they were indeed told the truth,
that the messiah was coming
and that John was the one called to prepare the way,
just like the prophets had declared.

He has to do that because John himself
has his own doubts about the whole thing,
and had sent his own followers to ask Jesus:
Did I get this right by thinking you were the messiah
whose way I was called to prepare?

Or am I sitting here in prison facing my execution

because I blew it.
 Did I point people to the wrong messiah?
 “Are you the one who is to come
 or are we to wait for another?”

The problem for John was
 that his understanding of the judgment
 the messiah was coming to bring
 wasn't being carried out by Jesus
 in quite the way he had expected.

When John appeared in the wilderness in last week's reading,
 he said about the one who was to come,
 “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 the wheat into the granary,
 but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Mt 3:11-12)

What John expected was a judgment
 that separated the righteous from the unrighteous –
 like Santa's naughty and nice list,
 the grain separated from the chaff, like at harvest.
 A judgment that burned to consumption
 by an unquenchable fire.

But Jesus showed him none of that.
 It's no wonder John had questions.

But it seems to have been the wrong question.
 The problem wasn't about who, but about how.
 John just didn't quite understand judgment
 in the way that the reign of God
 would carry out that judgment.

Fire can be for destruction, of course,
 and that's where John expected this judgement to go.

But fire is also for purification.
 Smelting fire is how we separate the pure metal
 from all the other impurities in it.
 And in that way, fire is like the winnowing fork
 that separates the grain from the stalk and chaff.
 The question is, what gets separated?

For Jesus, his coming and judgement
 isn't about separating two different kinds or classes of people –
 the righteous from the unrighteous,
 the naughty from the nice,
 the people who are grains from the people who are chaff,
 though there are plenty of churches and Christians
 who do think that's what it's all about,
 and some even help Jesus out
 by making the judgement themselves.

No, for Jesus, the fire and winnowing fork of judgment
 are about purifying ourselves –
 for each one of us to get rid of the stuff about us and inside us
 that separates us from God, wholeness, and the kingdom life.

That's what John's call to repent is all about –
 to prepare for the messiah by making a way within ourselves.
 It's a call to align ourselves with God's reign,
 not to judge others about their own alignment.

Jesus comes as the messiah of God –
 the judge and ruler of the kingdom of God –
 to fulfill the prophecy
 in which the promised one comes
 to reverse the broken, fallen ways of the world –
 the ways that separate us from God and wholeness
 like disease, weakness, and illness,
 blindness and leprosy,
 poverty, marginalization, and hopelessness,
 sin, suffering and death.

Jesus comes, not to judge certain people as unrighteousness
and separate them from God,
but to reverse the conditions and disease and infirmities
that are alien to the ways of the Kingdom in all of us,
and to restore all people to wholeness
and right relationship with God.

For Jesus, it's about cleansing people
from the conditions and the impurities
that keep us from enjoying
the fruitfulness, righteousness, and fullness of life
the way God wants us to live it.

For Jesus it means loving God's people to death
in order to defeat death.
Filling us with the Holy Spirit of life,
in order to purify our living.
And uniting us with him and one another
in his resurrection
and in the salvation, forgiveness, and life
that defeats sin, suffering and death forever.

What did you expect?
What did you expect
when they poured the water over your head
and marked you with the sign of the cross
at your baptism?

Baptism brings us into the kingdom life
by washing us clean in forgiveness to start anew,
filling us with the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit
to guide our living in God's way and to make us holy,
joining us to the death of Christ
so that by the power of the cross,
death no longer has dominion over us,
but promises us eternal life in the resurrection of Jesus.

What did you expect when you came to the table

for the Lord's Supper?

Holy Communion brings us and keeps us in the kingdom life:
 by uniting us with Christ, with one another,
 and with all the saints of God across time and space
 to live in God's holy and heavenly reign, even now,
 by declaring forgiveness and new life
 in the power of the Holy Spirit,
 and by sending us into the world
 to live in the ways of the kingdom every day that follows.

It doesn't always look like what we expect.
 It's easy to look around and think,
 this isn't going the way I thought it would,
 like John sitting in his prison cell
 wondering if he got it right.

So, it's probably a good thing,
 every now and again,
 to stop and take a bit of a break
 and ask ourselves, what did we expect?
 And is that how the Kingdom of God really looks?
 It's a very good Advent perspective to have.

And then to turn to look at the signs all around us
 and the work of God among us and through us,
 and to listen to Jesus' word that confirms it:

Yes, he is the messiah and Lord.
 Yes, this is the way of the kingdom of God,
 yes, the promise is sure and eternal,
 yes, the cross of Christ is for you,
 yes, God's way and intent for you is
 love, forgiveness, wholeness, and life.

That is something you can expect
 now and forever.