

“Have Hope?”
Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13;
Matthew 3:1-12

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Why did they come? Why did they come? John the Baptist was out in the wilderness—this guy in camel’s hair, and I don’t think he was in a nice camel’s hair jacket. I think it was a rough tunic. He was an early adopter of only eating locally—locusts and wild honey. He wasn’t quite the character you would expect everybody to go out and listen to. Why did they come?

His message—Repent!—everybody wants to come and hear that message, right? Repent! Prepare. Make paths straight for the kingdom is coming near. The kingdom approaches. They would have heard it that way rather than “the kingdom has come near.” Why did they come?

What if we were to go back in time and ask somebody who was there why they came? I can imagine someone who would have been a middle-aged man then, maybe 25 or 30, coming to the wilderness. If we asked him why he came, what might he say?

He might look at us in surprise and say, “Don’t you understand? You have the advantage of looking back across history. You see, in my time we (the peasants) were an oppressed people. We didn’t understand what was happening for sure but we knew it wasn’t right. We knew that we were dying too early. We knew that we struggled with disease and debilitation. We struggled with the fact that people kept losing their property to the elites. We would get in debt and they would come and buy it, and how did we keep going? How do we keep going? And the Romans just added to the struggle. You had to keep your head down as you went past the Roman guards, hoping they wouldn’t notice you. We felt vulnerable and alone. Where were we to turn for hope? We were beginning to feel hopeless. So when John came and said turn around, repent, the kingdom of God is at hand, the kingdom of God is approaching, it reminded us of God’s promise.”

I think it would have reminded them of something like this, from Psalm 72: The king’s son comes *that he might rule your people with righteousness and the poor with justice.*

And remember the passage out of Isaiah about the Root of Jesse: *that he would judge not with what his eyes see or decide with what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.* That passage goes on to describe a peaceable kingdom where the ravenous beasts and the prey live together.

The peasant might have questioned us, “Couldn’t you see that from the vantage point of history? We came because John offered hope, a hope that goes through repentance, a hope that opens up straight paths. I’m willing to take the detours off of

my heart. I want the kingdom of God to come. We feel like prey being devoured by the ravenous.”

We might think about the hopelessness that met a new hope in John. Then we might think about a different group that came to John and notice the contrast. I think John understood the peasant was coming because he saw in him the hope of God’s coming kingdom. But John saw some others coming. What did he call them? He wasn’t very nice. Of course, from a rough guy out of the wilderness you wouldn’t expect nice. He called them a brood of vipers. Why would he call the Pharisees and the Sadducees a brood of vipers? Who were they?

The Sadducees were the priestly folks who worked out of the temple. Their income came from the Temple tax. All people, if they wanted to be a good member of their Jewish society, paid the Temple tax which supported this priestly class. The Sadducees then had the money to buy up the peasants’ land when they couldn’t keep it up. They were the elites who were buying things up.

Buy why the Pharisees? They were just rabbis or teachers. What did they teach? If you asked our peasant, he probably would have said, “I can’t even afford the bowls that I’m supposed to have to do all the washing that they say I’m supposed to do.” A guy comes along later who says, “Why do you keep heaping rules upon these people when they need a physician?” (That guy was Jesus.) The Pharisees, instead of addressing the needs of the people, simply said, “If you do your religion right, you’ll be OK. Follow the rules.” The rules were beyond the means and capabilities of some of the poorest among them, the people who had the positions that weren’t appreciated, like shepherds.

When I read this story and think about this kind of situation, I wonder how do I listen and hear John’s message to repent, to take the detours away, to make the paths straight, to open my heart to the coming of Christ? There’s part of me that has a hard time identifying with the peasant, with the people who are coming to John. It’s easier to identify with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. My life’s not on the edge. I’m not worried about what food I will have tomorrow. I’m not struggling without any work. I haven’t been put into the position where I can only go out into the street and ask for work that day. I’m a lot more like the Sadducees who have what they need. I’m a lot more like the Pharisees who think they have an understanding of how things should be and address it. So when I hear John say repent, it makes me wonder what I need to repent of, what I need to turn from.

It reminds me of something Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in one of his Advent sermons. He said, “The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

It’s awfully easy to think I just want Jesus to come and make my life a little bit better. That’s not quite turning around. That’s not really addressing what I need to do. It’s more just asking God to make things a little bit better. It feels to me like what John is

asking is for me to really look at what's in the way. What's between me and the coming of Christ? What's between me and the way of Christ? Where do I find my hope? Is it hope in the life I already have to be made a little bit better, or is my hope really in the work of God, in the leading of Christ that leads me to care for others?

I think part of the problem with the Pharisees and the Sadducees is that what they care about is themselves and their way. How easy it is for me to be there with them, to make it about my way, my stuff, and forget about God's way—when I open up my heart, when I want to make the path straight for Christ. Instead, it's easy to look around and see my neighbors and to want to be like them or better than them, and not pay attention to God's way.

John says to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, "You need to bear the fruits of this repentance." We don't hear in this passage exactly what that is, but it's not what they're doing. We do have the rest of scripture to tell us. We have the vision from the Old Testament about righteousness and equity and justice. We have the invitation to want to live harmoniously together because of the love God has given us in Jesus Christ.

It is the opening of our hearts to the work of God that we might have the kingdom enter in and we might walk the way of Christ. That's our hope. It's a hope of care and consideration. It's a hope of a God that leads us and moves us to share life together, to worship in harmony. It's a hope because God comes to us.

I think as we come and move toward gathering around the table, it is a way of embracing, a way of physically showing the hope God has given us, the way God invites us to be the very family of faith, a community, the body of Christ, caring for one another, caring for God's people. And in it is the hope that God brings us that we can acknowledge the righteousness, care about the justice, live out the equity, and be God's people following Christ. It's then that I think we can say: May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in belonging so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.