

Matthew 3:1-12

Prepare the Way of the Lord! Comfort and Warning for Advent

Prayer: Father, we come to church today, some of us desperately needing comfort from you. We feel afflicted by our sin, by the fallen world we live in, by your enemies and the weight of spiritual warfare feels too much to bear. Some of us need to hear a warning from you. We have grown complacent. We have grown comfortable in this world and our place in it. We have filled our hearts with self-righteousness and we need you to shake us out of our stupor so that we can repent of our sin and experience afresh or for the first time your grace and mercy. It's in Jesus name that we pray, Amen.

Introduction

The season of Advent is about the arrival of Jesus Christ. We look forward to his return to our world to punish sin and to make all things new while at the same time celebrating that he already has come into our world to be a sacrifice and redeemer for his people. But what was it like to be the last generation of people, waiting to receive the Messiah, groaning in anticipation? What would they have been experiencing as they prayed for and hoped that any day now, the Savior they had been promised by their God would come and meet them in the suffering and their sin and their oppression by forces natural and supernatural?

The recipients of these Words, the Jewish people living in Galilee and Judea were nearing 90 years of occupation from the Roman Empire, the fifth foreign empire that had ruled some or all of this land in 6 centuries with only a brief moment of independence. They were living under a heavy tax burden and the new rulers were themselves polytheistic, meaning they worshiped many gods, while the Jewish people worshiped the One True God, the Lord, Yahweh.

The Roman would sometimes demonstrate some respect for the strange Jewish insistence, otherwise unknown in the ancient world, to remain monotheistic, but at other times would also create chaos and leading to insurgencies and civil unrest by humiliating or offending the religious among the community.

And none of the presses pause on all the other things that every human being deals with in their own life: our sin and rebellion against God, the sin of others, sickness death, mourning and grieving, poverty, and grueling labor for the days bread and little more. And in the milieu came a preacher called the John the Baptist.

Now John was, we are told by the text, weird. Verse 4 tells us that he wore a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt, which would not have been the normal way of dressing for a Judean male who likely wore a wool robe. He eats locusts and honey which is, um, gross. All of this is important though. It shows John as separated from the normal ebb and flow of Jewish life, while at the same time confirming his ability to speak to the Jewish people on behalf of God. John's dress is the uniform from an Old Testament prophet, Elijah. John's birth narrative, detailed in the book of Luke is very similar to both Isaac, the Patriarch, one of the Fathers of the Israelite and Jewish people, born to Abraham and Sarah when they were very old and then he is dedicated to serve the Lord as a Nazirite (which is different from a Nazarene) much like the Old Testament judges Samson and Samuel.¹ That also explains his strange diet as conforming to the very particular demands of that oath of service. John is this set apart weirdo who still stands in

¹ J. Knox Chamblin, [*Matthew: A Mentor Commentary*](#), Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2010), 242.

for the Jewish people, preaching to them, “Repent (turn away from sin), the Kingdom of Heaven, is at hand.”

This little vignette of a crazy looking, itinerant preacher in the back country of the most back part of the Roman Empire, ministering to an ethnic minority suffering under the Imperial boot, and an increasingly legalistic religious community, and still dealing with the everyday travails of life in a fallen world helps us enter into their world and hear two things God speaks to them that we also need to hear: **A Word of Comfort** and **A Word of Warning**.

A Word of Comfort

Matthew in his Gospel describes John’s ministry as fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy from the book of Isaiah:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.’ ”²

Now Matthew is not just showing John as the fulfillment of the prophecy, he is using the quote to pull the reader’s mind back to the Isaiah chapter 40, to consider the context of this prophecy. It’s a little like a dropping a line of a song so that the hearer goes in the head back to the full song. Kind of like how anytime anyone says “to the left” my brain fills it in with “to the left, everything you own in a box to the left. In the closet, that’s your stuff. If I bought it please don’t touch.” Every time. When Matthew says, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord’”, he want to the reader to remember a time Israel was at that

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:3.

point in a dark place, war loomed, the people were in rebellion against God, injustice was common in society and the words they received from God at that point. Isaiah 40:1-7 reads:

**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.**

**A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ³**

The beat of John was supposed to bring to mind is "comfort for the people of God", not because John himself was Israel's comforter but because he heralded the coming of the Lord. In the wilderness, this late-stage prophetic weirdo was a sign that God himself was coming and boy, is he coming with a lot of good news. Jerusalem's warfare is to end, her iniquity (or sin) forgiven, She's going to receive from the Lord twice as she gave in sin, which will more than atone for all she's done.⁴ If you're part of the put upon people of Israel, John's presence should excite you and move you to worship of God. It should prompt you to recognize the kingdom of heaven that John was preaching is near and you may begin to take your personal sin against

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 40:1–5.

⁴ John D. W. Watts, [*Isaiah 34–66*](#), Revised Edition., vol. 25, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2005), 609.

God seriously. And many people heard John, according to verses 5 and 6, and they responded by confessing their sin and turning away from sin and receiving as a sign that they were embracing the comfort and good news of God drawing near and establishing his kingdom by being baptized by John. They were acknowledging that they didn't have it all together and they needed God to intervene, they needed and external power to themselves to make them new, they needed comfort because they couldn't bring that about themselves in their situation. There is a reason we don't baptize ourselves.

But not everyone had this response. Two groups in particular stand out: First, the Pharisees, which are kind of the First Century Jewish version of the Moral Majority in that they aren't that moral and are actually a minority but act like neither is true. The Pharisees did take the Bible seriously, but rather than let it break their hearts to their own sin, they believed they could become as righteous as God demanded, and live perfect lives by following a bunch of rules. They believed in a coming Messiah, anticipating a kind of military deliverer who would drive out the pagan Romans and get Jewish society back on track. Second, the Sadducees who are the establishment. They are literally the people running the priestly and temple system at this time, they have the power of position, but they have a really low view of the Bible. They only believed that the Torah, or the first five books of what we call the Old Testament were binding, rejecting all the later books. Unlike the Pharisees, they weren't looking for a Messiah or a coming resurrection of the dead. They were happy with the status quo. And interestingly, John's presence made both of these groups curious in an angry kind of way. They both had people go out to see John do ministry and John gave them a stern **Word of Warning** in Matthew 3:7-10: **"You brood of vipers!** Let me take a tangent here. I have the experience

pretty often, where I meet someone and they hear my last name and I can see the wheels start turning and they say something like, “Hey, whose your dad?” And I tell them, “Monty Cates.” And they might respond with something like, “I know Monty! I’ve worked with him for 20-30 years or I went to high school with him! You look like him, I see it now!” It’s always a neat experience for me to watch someone make that connection, because they usually have a good impression of my dad. The Pharisees have the opposite experience. They show up and I can see John asking, “Who’s your daddy?” And they start rattling off their family tree like Matthew just did for Jesus, going all the way back to Abraham and John interrupts and says, “No I know who your daddy is. I can see the family resemblance. Your daddy is Satan. You are filled with the same lies and pride. Your daddy’s not Abraham because if he was your daddy, you’d be filled with faith in the promise of God, just like him.” That’s a big argument Paul makes in Romans.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. If you want to look like Abraham, you’ll see evidence of repentance in your life as you turn to trust in God. **And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**⁵

None of this is persuasion 101. But that’s not really John’s goal here. He isn’t trying to get them to change course; he is simply stating where their religious self-reliance and love of power has already brought them. You see these folks has deceived themselves into thinking they were “fine,” they were okay with God, they had it all together because they had the right

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:7–10.

ethnic background. Or they followed the rules that God gave and then some they made up. Or because they were in positions of religious authority whether they deserved them or not. As far as they were concerned, it was unfathomable that they could be out of God's favor because they weren't like the rabble over there who had openly sinned or who impoverished by life's circumstances, or were just trying to get by and weren't jumping through all the hoops. The Pharisees knew they weren't working with the Roman Empire as tax collectors and the Sadducees knew they were trusted to carry out the sacrifices and maintain the temple so they were fine! And John looks at them and says, "No. You are in a worse way than you can possibly imagine. The ax is coming for you. The wrath of God is kindled hot against you. You aren't children of Abraham, clinging on to God's promises in faith. You are children of Satan, treating God as though he is required to give you that to which you are entitled.

I've done a fair bit of counseling in my time in ministry. It's not my primary job, but I can tell you that the person that is hardest to work with is the person who has deceived themselves into thinking they are fine and everything is someone else's problem. They have no humility before God or man, have no capacity to see that they have caused pain or hurt, and what's worse is that in the church, often those folks come with a bunch of Bible verses and Christian-y sounding platitudes to throw out like a smoke screen that fools no one in the room but themselves. They don't think there is any need for change, to take the warnings seriously. Why would they? They are fine!

John says, no. No you're not fine. The path you are on looks nice because it is paved with religion and religious acts and it may fool some people but it doesn't fool God, and it is the path to hell. And look you can repent, you can turn back, but it involves "bearing fruit". There

will be evidence that repentance is real. And unless you take it seriously, John seems to suggest, “I’m not wasting my breath reasoning with unreasonable people.” Remember, you’re not doing business with John the Baptist or your pastor or even other people around you. It is the Lord who is coming and whose path must be prepared.

John says, **“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. 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 gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**⁶

It’s Jesus who is coming. He is the Lord for whom the voice in the wilderness cries. He is God coming to dwell among his people and his first coming should have provoked some holy terror in some people and his future return should do the same. This, by the way, is a very clear claim in Mark and Matthew’s Gospels that Jesus is God, that he is identifiable with the Lord, Yahweh, of the Old Testament. It’s not every fleshed out detail of trinitarian theology, but it is an important declaration of the truth of the divinity of Christ. And with Jesus’ divinity comes all the attributes we think of as belonging to God. In his Divine nature, if not his human nature, he is omnipresent, he is omnipotent, and importantly for what John the Baptist is telling us, he is omniscient. He knows all. He sees through the pretension and the pride and lies that we construct to bring ourselves false comfort and he’s going to be able to separate the wheat, the fruit of a life oriented toward God and toward repentance, from the chaff, the excess useless part of the wheat that gets turned into fuel for the fire and represents our self righteousness. This may sound harsh. This may sound scary. But if that’s what it takes to get people to think for

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:11–12.

a minute about whether they are comforted by their own actions and smug self-satisfaction, complacent toward God and his holiness, dismissive of the salvation he brings, then so be it. Sometimes, we need these sharp reminders to shake us out of the stupor of our comfortable lives. The warning is absolutely necessary.

The warning also makes the comfort all the more sweet. Because as deep as your sin seems, as painful as your life situation is, as oppressive as your oppressors feel, nothing compares to the hope of Christ our comforter coming to meet us in our where we are at, in the Wilderness, rather than demanding that we claw our way before his throne. He has come for you! He is returning for you! For you! He is coming to dwell with you! To dwell with those who can be humbled enough to see they need his comfort and his grace and mercy. And Jesus, being the second person in the triune Godhead, the Trinity, doesn't just bring himself. No, he brings the fullness of God to dwell among us and he baptizes us with his Holy Spirit, so that we aren't simply washing of some dirt, but that we are being remade at the spiritual level. Rather than being destroyed as chaff in fire, we are purified as gold in fire, made into the beings that God always intended for us to be.⁷

So, Redeemer, the option is before us. We can dig in, refuse to heed the warning John brings us, keep trying to save ourselves through self-righteousness. Or we can acknowledge, that actually, we're not okay. We're not fine, we're not good, we're not strong.. But Jesus is good. He is strong. And we can let him bring us peace and comfort that we cannot possibly bring to ourselves.

⁷ John Calvin and William Pringle, [*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*](#), vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 199.

Works Referenced

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Discussion Starters

1. **Read Matthew 3:1-12. Summarize in your own words. As an aside, what differences might you notice between Mark's account in Mark 1:1-7?**
2. **How might Jesus' coming be a comfort to you?**
3. **What areas of your life are you tempted to be self-righteous about? How might John's message in Matthew 3:7-10 word serve as a warning to you?**