

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday in Advent
December 7, 2025
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

"Inside Out"

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the foothills of Colorado, 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 “army surplus” clothing with a snakeskin belt around his waist, and his food was grasshoppers and blackberry jam. Then the people of Parker and all the Denver Metro area were going out to him, and all along Cherry Creek, and they were baptized by him, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many politicians coming for baptism, he said to them, “You snakes in the grass! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘Our ancestors came over with Lewis and Clark,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of the pioneers. 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.”

Did hearing scripture with familiar references make you listen more closely? That was my intent in using the MRV (Mike’s Revised Version), because we often grow a little blasé when hearing scripture because we’ve heard it so many times before. Perhaps this is the way Matthew’s first readers heard this passage, since it utilized terms and locations with which they were familiar.

Similarly, when we hear this passage in terms which are familiar to us, we have an opportunity to hear it in a fresh way. After all, we know a lot more about: Colorado than we do about Judea, Cherry Creek than we do about the Jordan River, grasshoppers and

blackberry jam than we do about locusts and wild honey, and politicians than we do about Pharisees and Sadducees.

Changing the terminology of the passage made me wonder, “Why was John the Baptist so hard on the politicians (the Pharisees and Sadducees)? Matthew tells us that they were coming to him for baptism. Isn’t that a good thing? Why would John chastise these community leaders for what appears to be a positive step?

Notice that Matthew says they were coming for baptism, not baptism for repentance. The local “big-wigs” were coming to John for appearance sake. They were not coming out of a sincere attitude of repentance; they were coming for show. Their trek to the river had nothing to do with doing an about-face in their lives, and everything to do with scoring points with their followers. No wonder John chided them. We all know how duplicitous and underhanded politicians can be. They had no business showing up for church unless they really wanted to be there. They should be ashamed of themselves for going through the motions of being religious. Thank goodness that we’re not like that! (OOPS, I’m stepping on lots of toes today)

One of the dangers of scripture is seeing other people in it when we are supposed to see ourselves. We all have our superficial tendencies, especially when it comes to our faith. For instance, let’s compare the amount of time we spend decorating our homes for the holidays with how much time we spend in Bible study, prayer, reflection, worship or other activities which change us from the inside out. Now I’ve really gone from preaching to meddling!

The point is not to stop us from decorating and stringing lights (sorry, spouses, I’m not letting you off the hook that easily). The point is to spend at least an equal amount of time lighting our inner lives. I believe that God enjoys every ornament that is hung, every light that is lit, every garland that is strung and even clothes that don't fit. But I also believe that the Lord wants us to give equal time to our relationship with God’s Son, Jesus.

There was a man who lived in upstate New York who was very wealthy. His estate was worth millions. He owned land, houses, antiques and cattle. He and his wife were childless for years until, very late in life, his wife gave birth to a baby boy. The boy was severely handicapped, but was the apple of his father’s eye. When the boy was five, his mother died, which drew him even closer to his father.

At age thirteen, the boy’s birth defects cost him his life and the father died soon thereafter from a broken heart. There being no heirs, the estate was auctioned off to hundreds of bidders. The first item auctioned was a painting of the boy. No one bid. They waited like vultures for the valuable items. Finally, the poor housemaid, who helped raise the boy, offered \$5 for the picture and easily took the bid.

As the auctioneer handed over the painting, he ripped a hand written will off the back of the picture. This is what it said: “To the person who thinks enough of my son to buy this painting, I give my entire estate.” The auction was over. The greedy crowd walked away in shock and dismay.

How many of us have sought after what we thought were true riches only to find out later that our heavenly Father was prepared to give us His entire estate if only we had sought after His Son? God wants us to think first of the gift of His son, Jesus, even while we are exchanging gifts with one another and prettying up our yards and houses.

I do like this time of year partly because the world looks different with lights and decorations. Even though Disney and Hallmark seems to be celebrated as much as Jesus, it is still a testament to a remarkable event that the world recognizes and celebrates 2000 years later. Think about it – this holiday focuses on the birth of a non-descript child, born in an obscure village to humble parents, a birth that literally changed the world and is still changing it all these years later.

Christ changes us and the world from the inside out by calling us to follow his example. As the Prince of Peace, Christ summons us to be peacemakers. This second Sunday in Advent, we focus on the peace that Christ brings to our lives and the world. We need this reminder that despite wars, hatred, and violence that make news every day, Jesus is still working on lives from the inside out to bring peace to a troubled world. The uglier side of life is so much easier to see because it is repulsive, but that doesn’t mean that the beauty of peace is not there – just that it doesn’t call attention to itself.

Peace is the still water that runs deep. Peace is not the absence of war; it is the presence of love. When love for others, all others, is at the center of our being, we can experience peace from the inside out. When we seek to emulate what Jesus actually said and did, we will have peace from the inside out.

Jesus came to show us how to be the kind of people God created us to be. God created us not to hate but to love; not to exclude but to include; not to reject but to affirm; not to divide but to unite; not to perpetrate violence but to perpetuate peace.

That sounds like a tall order and it would be if we were left to our own devices to effect these changes. The good news is that we don’t have to work nearly as hard on getting our inside straightened up as we do on our outside, because that’s why Jesus was born in the first place – to give us a path toward the peace that defies logic. On our own, we can’t possibly do enough to correct what is wrong with us on the inside, and we don’t have to. Jesus Christ has done that for us. All we need to do is yield to Him and the peace and love He offers.

We're pretty good with making external changes. We dress up our homes and plug in lights hoping that we can also plug into the peace that Christ offers. But change from the inside out is not something WE DO – it is something done to us by Jesus Christ as we build our relationship with him, spend time with him, worship him, pray to him, laugh with him, weep with him, live with him and die with him.

There are no ladders to climb, no lights to test, no ornaments to hang, no packages to wrap - only a heart open to God who is willing to come in as an innocent child to stand in for us in God's judgement of our lives. John the Baptist's call to us across the river of time is to prepare the way of the Lord into our lives – beginning from the inside out.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen