



Roanoke, Virginia
November 27, 2022

“While We Are Waiting: Repent”

Matthew 3:1-6

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Today is the First Sunday of Advent. We begin our Advent sermon series “While We Are Waiting” as we consider what unexpected newness we may encounter as we journey once again through the season of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting. We will explore waiting and repentance, waiting and preparing, waiting and watching, waiting and seeking, and on Christmas eve waiting, finding and welcoming. But for today, we will explore waiting and repentance.

Our passage for today comes to us from Matthew 3:1-6.

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, **2** “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” **3** 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.’”

4 Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, **6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.



We have entered into a new church year. If you didn't know, today is New Year's day in the life of the church, and Advent is the beginning. The paraments have been changed from green to purple. We have transitioned from one season to the next.

Thanksgiving has passed. The college football regular season is over (and I must say "Go Gamecocks!").

Boxes are being brought down from attics or up from basements that are jam-packed with garland, lights, and ornaments. Party invitations are being sent out; calendars are filling up with get-togethers, drop-ins, parties, and family functions. There is lots to do before we hit the date we are all waiting for, the day we long for that brings goodness and cheer. So...haul out the holly, deck the halls, hang the stockings. Make your "to-do" list and check it twice! Hurry! Christmas is right around the corner!

Now forget all of that. Forget all the manufactured "tis the season" stuff that calls us into busy-ness, that calls us to accumulate and consume. Forget the perfection our culture expects of us. Forget the happy expectation that leads us to celebrate something that once happened.

Instead, slow down. And get ready for something that has not yet happened! That is the agenda of the entire season of Advent.

The word *advent* means "arrival" and "coming." The season of Advent is a season of waiting, of anticipation, as we long for the arrival and the coming of the Lord.

Did any of you brave a supermarket or grocery store on Wednesday of last week? Did any of you forget the cranberry sauce, the gravy mix, that one essential ingredient that ties together the entire Thanksgiving meal, so you had to run out to grab it? If you did, I bet you know a thing or two about waiting.

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time waiting. I am not the most patient person. And to be honest I sometimes try to take things into my own hands by going through the self-checkout line. And too often, that backfires ... "Please place the item you just scanned in the bagging area. Then proceed to scan your next item." (*beep beep beep*) "Please wait. An associate is on the way." And heaven forbid you are picking up a bottle of wine or something... "ID check required. Help is on the way." And there is no one in sight!

Frustration. Anxiousness. This is not the waiting Advent calls us into.

The waiting Advent calls us into is one of hopeful anticipation. Advent-waiting is not only to celebrate something that has already happened. Yes, we are to celebrate the incarnate birth. But we now wait for something different! We are waiting for the coming of the Lord in a way that we have not yet seen; we wait for something we have not experienced before.



In the words of the great preacher Peter Gomes, “Advent is not Christmas but judgement, not cheap synthetic joy but divine and ultimate justice.” With the singular focus on something that happened long ago, Christmas belongs to the world, Gomes says, the church no longer has hold of it; but “Advent and its expectations, its call for patience, its earnest waiting—that belongs to us.”¹

Advent places us between two promises, between Christ’s birth and Christ’s return, between the Incarnation and the Second Coming, and it is meant to invigorate our yearnings for fulfillment once again, to consider how we might join God in the movement towards a world that is more like the realm of God. The impossible realities that we as Christians are meant to believe—light overcoming darkness, hope prevailing over despair, peace overpowering might, meekness inheriting the earth—these truths draw us into a hopeful expectation of things yet experienced. This is the waiting of Advent. An attentive waiting, an active waiting of spiritual movement that takes us to and beyond the birth of Jesus, to a new expectancy of God’s beloved community.

If any of you have read CS Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or have seen the movie, you can think of John the Baptist like the beavers. The beavers tell the Pevensie children that Aslan (the great Lion —and Christ figure of the book) is “on the move.” In other words—Get ready! Something is up! The prophecies are coming true. The moment we have been waiting for is here! The anticipation is over, change is upon us. Get ready!

John the Baptist bursts onto the scene in Matthew’s gospel to proclaim, “God is on the move!” This message had echoed through Jewish life for generations long before John spoke these words. First uttered in Isaiah 40, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” This message that God would come to forgive, to rescue Israel from exile, and to finally restore God’s people and the world was the great message of hope for Israel.

What hope do these words bring for you today? What is your hoped-for reality this Advent season? What do you hope this Christmas will be like? What is your hope for yourself, your family, this church, the world?

John’s message declares that the promises are coming true. The Messiah—God’s anointed King—is coming! There is an urgency to his declaration. Get ready! It’s happening now! And his instructions can be boiled down to one word: REPENT!

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

This message caught people’s attention. They sat up and took notice.

¹ Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*; “The Art of Impatient Living” delivered The Memorial Church, Harvard University.



But they weren't ready. The people, even the devout Jews, knew in their bones they were not ready for God's return. So, they rushed out to the Jordan River to hear John's preaching and to be baptized. The people confessed their sins as John plunged them into the water. And it was the same water that, thousands of years earlier, the children of Israel had crossed when they first entered the promised land, and they now emerge once more from that water as a sign of a greater conquest, one where God will defeat the power of sin and evil for good!

Yet going through the motions of baptism was not enough—it is never enough. John's proclamation was for repentance. To repent is to turn, to have a dramatic change of mind and heart that takes a new direction, a new orientation that drives your life. Ultimately to turn away from sin and turn your life back toward God!

In 2016 Jeep came out with a great commercial to introduce their new Jeep Compass.² It is titled "Recalculating." The commercial opens with a man walking down a busy city street, and the people around him are entering tall business buildings. A generic GPS voice says, "In 30 feet, turn left." Left will take the man into one of those tall buildings, just like everyone else. He looks down, then back up, and with a smile continues right—"Recalculating." The commercial continues with various scenes of people going through different moments of life: a couple finds out they are pregnant—recalculating; a man is on one knee proposing—recalculating; a person carries boxes out of an office space—recalculating; a couple carries boxes into an empty house—recalculating; a person driving in the woods sees a bear in the rear-view mirror—recalculating.

The commercial ends with a family on top of a mountain at sunset (of course standing beside the new 2017 Jeep Compass), and the GPS voice says "Love. Hope. Happiness. Whatever your destination, there's a million, beautiful, ever-changing ways to get there."

Well, we all know that a new Jeep Compass won't ultimately take you to a destination of love, hope, or happiness. But, if your destination is the kingdom of God, John the Baptist is the voice on your GPS, who is calling out from the wilderness, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near!" And we know, as Christians, there is only one way to get there.

John's message for repentance comes out of the wilderness, calling us to prepare the way of the Lord in the desert places of our hearts.

John's message for repentance is about recalculating, re-orienting our lives, to change direction and take a different path, to turn from sin and evil back toward God.

² 2017 Jeep Compass "Recalculating" Commercial <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnACnahoxiM>



In a minute, we will stay seated to sing the refrain of hymn number 89 “For You, O Lord, My Soul in Stillness Waits”

And I want you to consider what wilderness place in your own heart this message of repentance is calling out from. From where is God speaking?

Beloved, as we journey through this season of Advent, a time of waiting between two promises, repentance is the first turn. And if our hoped-for destination is a place of divine restoration, a place of peace, love, and justice, then we will have to navigate the wilderness of the world and the wilderness of our own hearts, as we wait in hope for the Lord praying “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Amen.

