



Sunday Sermon
December 7, 2025
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Advent II, A

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3: 1-12

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.
AMEN.

Things seem terribly out of sorts. There is so much hurt and sorrow. We grieve. Sometimes we are fearful; sometimes anger wells up. We know of far-off wars, our own economic worries. There is division about what to do and who is to blame. We don't necessarily have confidence in governments, but we certainly don't have the answers ourselves.

Closer to home, people we love struggle with illness, with aging. A dear one dies or slowly slips away to dementia. We watch others in our community struggle with homelessness, addiction and hunger on our streets. This is a complicated and stressful time.

Yet here we are. We gather. We choose to come. We choose to be here. We come with our imperfections and hurts. Some of us come despite the church's words of judgments falling unfairly and unlovingly upon us or those we care about. And some carry deeper trauma; a lost job with few prospects, a spouse's departure, a parent's rejection. We don't know why the person sitting near us is here; we might not know totally why we are here. But rest assured, we are here because we are looking and seeking. And we don't want to be alone.

Truth be told, we are all wounded by the world, to live is to experience pain and sorrow. We are flawed, a bit broken...human. While we get a bit edgy when we talk about sin, it is just a word that tries to collect the jumble of things that we do out of fear, or insecurity, or anger...again because of our human beingness. And we see what this thing we call sin

does to us and to the world, and we don't like it. It doesn't feel right; it does feel like who we want to be...who God wants us to be.

And so we are here in hope. We hope that we might find some glimpse of truth that will help us make sense of things, and maybe just maybe find some healing of our wounds and, yes, forgiveness of our sins. We have come here because we are a bit lost. We suspect that maybe together we can find our way.

Well, we have come to the right place. In today's gospel, those coming to John the Baptist were seekers just like us. They go into the wilderness in search of healing and forgiveness in their troubled time. At a riverbank in a rugged place, they find an equally rugged man preaching. John was quite a character, a hermit who people seek out...an ascetic who lives a life of self-denial; clothed in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey.

What John proclaims is both stunningly simple and the work of our lifetime: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." It is good news. This old broken world is being transformed. Isaiah's vision of a new creation is breaking forth:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The world of war and woe is not God's desire. Peace and restoration is God's dream. John builds on the prophetic vision of Isaiah. He knows that God is up to something, both in the present and in the time to come. There is holy movement and change. And the movement comes and becomes with us. God loves us - full stop. And that love heals us as we turn to God. John uses washing in water as a sign of God's transforming love. It is grace that makes us new—a sacrament of repentance. The Greek word used for repenting is *metanoia*, which means to turn around. We are to *metanoia*...change directions...away from worldly directions to Jesus' direction.

Curiously, as John is doing this ministration of transformation, there is an interruption in the story. Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, and John sees right through them. They are coming. But they are coming for ritual and not transformation...talk the talk, go through the motions, but without the actions and life of repentance. He is blunt; "you brood of

vipers.” John knows that superficial pity is spirit killing. This interruption is a cautionary word for us. We cannot simply be Sunday morning Christians. When the kingdom of God comes near, we should be all in. *Metanoia* is not a slight course correction; it is a total change in direction. We should act different; we should live differently.

What John did not do was encourage those who he baptized to remain with him in the wilderness. Rather, he expected them to leave...to go back into the world as bearers of the coming kingdom. To be children of hope and peace makers. Likewise, we come to St. Hilda’s as seekers. We too are washed in baptism; we are given a new path by of water and spirit. And we come to this table to the blessed sacrament, to be forged into a community of unity, a body, that can proclaim in deed and word the Good News that the kingdom is near...the peaceable kingdom is breaking forth. And we will join Jesus as peace makers!

Three weeks ago, the President of the United States pointed his finger at a questioning reporter and said, “Quiet, quiet piggy!” It is unremarkable and hardly shocking that this bully again spoke in such a misogynistic way to a woman doing her job. What did get noticed is that none of the men around her objected. I would like to think that I would have been different, but I’m not sure. As I practice my own repenting, I can claim that I have not done enough when injustice is practiced right in front of me or on my behalf. I can also recall moments when regrettable and hurtful words have come from my mouth; we have erred and strayed like lost sheep. And God says, I love you...there is a better way. We are invited to do the inner work so we can show forth that the peaceable kingdom has drawn near.

Together, we have the chance to do just that and to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near, in deed and word. A word can spoken to stop a bully or a Christmas hamper can lessen poverty, a touch or word comfort the afflicted, assuage the pain of another. When love is offered, peace comes...the kingdom comes near.

The great preacher and New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock once told a story about such love offered:

He was stuck in Winnipeg in an early October snowstorm that paralyzed the city. Everything was shut down and his host could not even make it to Fred’s hotel to pick him up for breakfast. So, for breakfast, Fred found himself at a crowded bus depot café about two blocks from his hotel. As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth. A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table and asked

him what he wanted. Not knowing what the café served, Fred asked to see a menu.

“What’d ya want with a menu?” the man asked. “We have soup.”
“Then I’ll have soup,” he said. Just what he wanted—soup for breakfast. The man brought the soup and Craddock says it was an unusual looking soup. It was grey, the color of a mouse. He did not know what was in it, but he took this spoon and tasted it. Awful! “I can’t eat this,” he thought. So he sat in that crowded café warming his hands around the bowl, railing against the world, stuck in Winnipeg.

Then, the door opened and someone yelled, “Close the door,” and she did. A woman came in. She was middle-aged, with a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. The big man with the greasy apron came over and the whole café heard this conversation:

“What’d ya want?”

“Bring me a glass of water,” she said.

The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question.

“What’d ya want?”

“Just the water.”

“Lady, you gotta order something.”

“Just the water.”

The man’s voice started rising: “Lady, I’ve got paying customers here waiting for a place, now order!”

“Just the water.”

“You order something or you get out!”

“Can I stay and get warm?”

“Order or get out.”

So, she got up. The people at the table where she was seated got up, people around got up, the folks that let Fred sit at the table got up, Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door.

“Ok,” the big man with the greasy apron said, “She can stay.” And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of that soup.

Fred asked the man sitting next to him, “Who is she?”

“I never saw her before,” he said, “but if she ain’t welcome, ain’t nobody welcome.”

Then Craddock said, all you could hear was the sound of people eating that soup. “Well, if they can eat it, I can eat it,” he said. He picked up his spoon and started eating the soup. Fred reflected that “It was good soup. I ate all of that soup. It was strange soup. I don’t remember ever having it. As I left I

remembered eating something that tasted like that before. It tasted like bread and wine.(1)

The kingdom of God has come near. It is right here...in bread and wine. It is here in you and me when we have the courage to be changed. Before us is the chance of a lifetime - no, it is the chance of eternity. Jesus comes among us and shows us the way of this new life of giving, loving, serving...of peace. It begins at the river's edge in the waters of baptism. It takes us to the table, where gathered as one, we glimpse heaven, a peep hole into the oneness of creation as it was supposed to be and will be again.

Once fed, we cannot stay here, but we must go out those doors to live lives renewed and redeemed. Repent, the kingdom of God has come near. God loves us enough to expect us to change. We can be like these Advent candles - hope and peacemakers...shining light in darkness until the coming dawn. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

(1) Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (Chalice