

Expectation, Prophets, and Change
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December 7, 2025 – Advent 2A
Matthew 3:1-12

Advent is a season of preparation and *expectation*. We are waiting for Jesus to make his appearance. Since we *believe strongly* he'll be right there in the manger when the calendar turns to December 25, we're devoting our time to getting ready. There are other things which fuel our expectations, too: tv and radio stations playing all our favorite songs; cooking all the special food; making wish lists; and seeing family and friends whom we only get to be with at this time of year. But what exactly do we expect out of this Advent season? Tidings of comfort and joy? Retaining old family traditions because they're old family traditions and doing so honors our parents and grandparents? Hanging onto all the "classic" toys and TV specials as a way of being a kid again? Keeping the music we sing, the script for the Christmas pageant, and decorations exactly the same? To make new memories which will override some bad ones? For it all to be over? Or something else?

Advent weaves together the need to look back and remember, and the need to look ahead to what's coming. Just when we get the hang of that, we learn that we have to do both of them at the same time. We remember what God has done for us through Jesus. As we wait for God to act again, we hear from John the Baptist that preparation and expectation require something a little more than pulling out the old family recipes or making new angel wings out of wire coat hangers and tinsel. John, the voice in the wilderness shouting "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" at the top of his lungs, reminds us in no uncertain terms that we need all of it. We need our present actions to match up with what Jesus taught in the past in order to prepare for the future

arrival of the kingdom he promised.¹ As a seminary classmate, Caleb Lines, who is the senior pastor at a UCC church in San Diego, often says, the kingdom of God is already here – so what are we going to DO about it?

John has that same challenge for his hearers. He also clearly answers Caleb's question: Repent! Change your hearts and your actions, before it's too late and you end up being like the tree that's already got the axe stuck in it, or the chaff that's being burned by an unquenchable fire. This is definitely not angels and fa-la-las and shepherds going to see the newborn baby in the manger. This is something else entirely. IT is the vision of a future where God's arrival on the scene will have serious consequences – and the only way to avoid them is to turn away from all the things that distract people from paying attention both to God and to one another.

So who is John the Baptist, and just what is he doing here?

Like his fellow gospel writer Mark, Matthew doesn't provide much in the way of John's biographical details. The nice backstory that Luke tells, where John is part of a clergy family and a cousin of Jesus through his mother's side, just isn't that important to Matthew. It's John's message, and the hints John's very presence are meant to drop about what time it is, that do matter. To a first-century Jewish exile living in Antioch, where most scholars think Matthew's gospel was written, hearing a passage that begins with, "In those days, a man wearing a camel hair shirt appeared in the wilderness" would immediately bring to mind the prophet Elijah... who also had a habit of hanging

¹ David L. Bartlett, "Matthew 3:1-12: Pastoral Perspective." In *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1 (Advent through Transfiguration)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 44-48.

out in the wilderness, wearing a camel hair shirt, and telling anyone who would listen to repent, or else.

Those first-century ancestors of ours knew that if Elijah, or someone in that same mold, has shown up, it's a sign that the reign of God will very soon follow. The people who made the trip to see him would have known exactly what that meant: it is THAT time, and so they have to act accordingly to prepare the way within their own hearts to receive him. "As we read through their eyes, John the Baptist stands here in our lives on this second Sunday of Advent to remind us what we await this Christmas: It is God who is coming among us. It is [God's] reign that is at hand. And if this is cause for joy, as all the lights and carols tell us it's supposed to be, it is cause for repentance also."² In this season, we want to "...give lots of attention to the joy. But we need to hear the message of repentance also, because only then are we really hearing John's message; only then are we really hearing what time this is."³

The message John gives to the crowds who've come to hear him out in the wilderness isn't just about "it's time." There is a warning here, as well as lots of foreshadowing of what is to come. First, John says in no uncertain terms to the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were the highly educated and privileged leaders of the community, status is not a guarantee of salvation. They will have to work at it, the same as everyone else. The foreshadowing starts with John's initial declaration that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus himself will take up that message for himself.

² Catherine Sider Hamilton, "Commentary on Matthew 3:1-12." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-7> [accessed December 2, 2025].

³ Ibid.

And, finally, the warning also sets the stage for the running conflict between Jesus and these same Pharisees and Sadducees. John is but the first one to call them out for thinking that their position as leaders automatically gives them a pass. Instead of saying to themselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor, so we can do whatever we want" they need to turn their focus elsewhere. "[They] have to seek to speak what is true. [They] have to listen to God and [God's] word and [God's] Christ, and not to [their] own whims, whatever they might be that day. [They] must bend the knee and let God be king."⁴

Giving up control, whether it's of something big like being a community's leader, or something smaller, like the thousand and one tiny details of this season – whether that's over the kitchen, the decorations, the travel schedule, the kids' toy lists, or anything else – is much easier said than done. However, John's words here remind us that we are not really in control to begin with. We can't control the precise time that the kingdom of God comes near, or even how the people around us will receive the news that it's happening. We might even need to let go of some of our expectations about what any of this is supposed to look like, and instead focus on just doing the best we can to love our neighbors.

It's not easy to bend the knee and let God be king. We ARE human, after all, and with that comes a need to feel as if we're the masters of our own little corners of the world. If there is anything that this Advent season of watching and waiting reminds us, it's that we really aren't in control over anything, except whether we will do the work of

⁴ Ibid.

changing our hearts and minds and actions that Jesus' arrival requires. The kingdom of God may be near, but as the poet Ann Weems writes,

Our God will be where God will be

with no constraints,

no predictability.

... When God is ready

God will come

even to a godforsaken place

like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch...

for you know not when

*God comes.*⁵

⁵ Ann Weems, "The Coming of God." In *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 13.