

“Repent!”

Matthew 3:1 – 12; Mark 1:14 – 15



In my research on this passage I read of a pastor who preached on this same passage some years ago.

So what he did for added impact was he closed his sermon by running down the centre aisle of the church waving an axe in the air shouting: “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!”

Needless to say three prominent church families and one new guest never came back to worship!

This morning we have John the Baptist in view – he’s the one preparing the way.

Many Jews of the time were expecting the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the King.

There was kingdom fervour in the air and John arrives as the herald.

And John like many of his compatriots believed that the Messiah would bring history to a close – a fiery one.

The Messiah would gather” his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

After 400 years of silence God speaks, and he speaks through John.

And what we find is he’s the kind of guy at the Christmas party that people want to avoid. He says things that aren’t PC.

It's like he has no inner monolog to control his thought processes.
His fashion was... different.
Yet people, we are told, flocked to him.

"In a word or two, what kind of God does John the Baptist describe?"

The Crazy Love of God

The thing is: John claims to speak for God.
He calls people snakes, talks of people being like dead, withered trees that are in danger of being thrown into a great cosmic bonfire

John talks about the wrath of God.

When we say, "God is love and would not condemn anyone", John comes along and stands in stark contradiction.

And people wonder, is God really like that?
Some people cannot conceive the God spoken of by John.

I think that many, many people – including Christians – hold to a view of God being a god who is always cool, calm and collected.

God is always even keeled, reasonable and never gets upset with people.
He's so tender, meek and mild.

Imagine a small child – a toddler – in a moment of inattention, runs away from his mother. He has a big grin on his face.
He's having the time of his life because he thinks he's enjoying his "freedom".
By the time she notices his mother knows differently.
His mother knows he is in great danger as he races towards a busy road.
She sprints after him, yelling, shouting, screaming at him to stop, to come back.
And what mother or parent wouldn't???

And yet sometimes we picture a God who serenely stands there as we go headlong towards our own destruction.
We say things like, "Love is love" and "Follow your heart" and think of course God agrees.

He's so placid. He's easy going and mild-mannered and good-natured.

But that's hardly the God we encounter here and in fact, in Scripture.

John stands in a long line of prophets who speak for God.

I mean, for example, in Amos chapter 5 God says to His people:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me!
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!”¹

When we read phrase “the wrath of God”, it's not talking about irritability; it is the love of God in friction with sin, with evil, with injustice, with wrongdoing. That kind of friction starts a fire.

And here's the thing to remember: John's ministry is affirmed by Jesus and later on Jesus too calls a group of sincere people a bunch of snakes – unclean and dangerous.²

So we are reminded of this morning as we look at this passage is that this God, this Jesus is at times, mean and wild and fierce. He is not to be trifled with.

“Safe” Christians

And when think about this wild and fierce God, who does John's words target in particular?

The Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Preachers often portray the Pharisees and the Sadducees as the ultimate bad guys.

¹ Amos 5:21 – 25

² Matthew 12:34

What we forget is that they were the people of faith of their day.
They sincerely believed. *They did.*
And they were people of great spiritual devotion.

Take for example the Pharisees in particular.
They loved Scripture.
One scholar observed:

They revered, studied, memorized, and sought to interpret Scripture accurately. They made it their life pursuit to apply the teaching of Scripture to every detail of life. The Pharisees had a very high view of God's word and sought to obey it every command. They had well-developed liturgy based on the reading and application of the Bible. The Pharisees' minds and lives were bathed in the Holy Scriptures.³

They prayed three times a day.
They gave a tenth of their income and on top of their tithe they gave to the poor and those in need.
They fasted twice a week.

And here they were having travelled from Jerusalem to the Jordan River on foot (which is roughly the same distance from Cromwell to Luggate) to listen to John.

So what was there problem that John speaks so fiercely?

“From what you know, what was his problem with these devout people?”

When you read through Scripture you gain some insight.
Some loved to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1 – 5).
Some loved money (Luke 16:14).
Some took pride in their superficial spirituality (Luke 18:9 – 14).

This toxic combination was seemingly hidden from view.

Instead of seeing themselves as belonging to one great mass of needy people called the human race, they saw themselves as a special class of people.⁴

³ Tom Hovestol, *Extreme Righteousness: Seeing Ourselves in the Pharisees* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 28.

⁴ “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers,

But before we sigh with relief remember that John's words are especially directed at those of us of faith.

I mean, they took great pride in Abraham as their forefather in the faith but we have to be so careful too.

Someone said, "We are all beggars telling other beggars where to find bread:".

It's because of this that there are times when God's comes to at times to shake *us*.

And sometimes we need shaking.

You know, when we sentimentalise Jesus we end up with a God we prefer who's just so nice, so sensitive, wouldn't say boo to a fly. All sorts of attitudes and words and actions linger among God's people that shouldn't.

Repentance

So at times this mean and wild God comes to us not with the word we want to hear but with the word we *need* to hear.

What does John say? Repent.

Then we're told in Mark's Gospel, after John was put in prison, Jesus comes and says... "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. *Repent* and believe the good news!"⁵

So what's the word we need to hear?

The word we need to hear is all throughout this passage – *repent!*

Mention the word repentance though, and you're likely to get funny looks. Even within the church followers of Jesus have become deeply suspicious of this word "repent" and those who use it.

evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." Luke 18:11, 12).

⁵ Mark 1:14 – 15.

On the lips of the spiritually abusive, the self-righteous or smug it is a word of accusation and condemnation, of fault-finding and hypercritical.

The thing is, repent is a *good* word.
If Jesus commands it, it must be good.

Repentance is about telling the truth about yourself and accepting the truth about God.

Repent means “to turn.”

To repent means to change one’s mind, to turn around and go in a different direction, to start living and thinking differently.

It means admitting that you’re wrong.

All of us at some point are facing in the wrong direction; we are wrong about God, His Kingdom, His people and ourselves.

Repentance is always and everywhere the first word in the Christian life.

No one can begin and live the Christian life without admitting that they get stuff wrong.

And because that’s the case, repentance is a decision that also includes uncomfortable emotions.

No one enjoys admitting they are wrong and yet the pain can be a signpost pointing to Jesus.

Repentance can sound like a harsh word yet is a word set on a foundation of grace.

There are two ways of repenting.

One, there are what are called vice lists on the lips of Jesus and in different parts of Scripture that highlight areas of sin.

For example Jesus said,

“For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you.”

If you want to put your hope in Christ then you need to stop doing those things.

There is also repentance called for goes deeper: repenting – expressing sorrow and remorse – of the sin behind the sin.

Here's the thing: everyone gets their identity, their sense of value from somewhere or something or even someone.

Human beings are made to centre their lives on God and love him supremely above anything else, to build our sense identity on Him.
Anything else is sin.

That was the issue with the Pharisees – there repentance was superficial. Their attitudes, motivations, thoughts and affections were disordered that were the cause of other sins.

Take lying. If you lie, why do it.
It's not simply to avoid punishment – there are often other drivers.
You may lie to protect your ego. You lie gain others approval rather than Christ's.

Or greed and money issues.
If you pursue money it may be because it seems to provide greater security than Jesus. If it really has a hold on your life it may lead to other sins such as stealing and fraud.

If anything else is more central to our significance, purpose and happiness than our relationship with God then despite everything else we do, we are ultimately fruitless.

And start becoming like deadwood; the sap of our lives starts to dry up.
And all sorts of behaviour pops up in our lives instead.

Repent and believe the Good News about *Jesus*.
In him God's good, perfect and beautiful reign has come.
In him there is forgiveness. In him we have been reconciled to God.
In him we find our true identity.
In him we find our fullest significance, purpose and happiness.

God becomes fierce, mean and wild at times not to condemn us but because he loves us and wants the best to happen for you and for me.
Like the mother chasing after her baby He wants the best for us.

You see God does not accept as we are.
God *welcomes* us as we are but in Jesus through the Spirit he goes to work in our lives.

And this morning Jesus is here to with immerse you again in the Holy Spirit and he will forgive and purge away the sin that's troubling you.

He'll make you new.
That's what Jesus does!

He'll renew areas of your life that you thought were all but dead.
That's what the Spirit does.

But for that to happen sometimes we need to take an honest look at our lives.

As I've been talking this morning there maybe there are some things that have come to mind that you're not proud of, maybe something you've been doing or way you've been behaving and it's been lingering.

It may be it that at deeper there are attitudes and thoughts that are not God-honouring and not people honouring either.

You respond to God this morning.

One of fruits of repentance is confession and confession comes with a promise:
"If we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."