

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 07, 2025
The Second Sunday Of Advent

Litany and Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz

on
Matthew 3:1-12

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Emmanuel's Flame

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”

Then, a little later, to certain persons who have come for baptism, we hear this: “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

It is an odd combination, isn't it? On the one hand, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” That's good news, hope for the future. There's this sense of a liberating army on the move. God's dominion at our doorstep. On the other hand John rakes them over the coals: “You nest of poisonous snakes, who told you to run?” Why are you resisting what is coming?

In the ancient world, “brood of vipers” was no mere colorful insult, but a real nightmare fuel. Venomous snakes haunted fields and houses; one bite could be a death sentence. And so vigilance against them was a constant part of their lives: they burned brush and cleared rubble to remove nests, sealed the cracks in walls and floors, and when they had to, they used long staffs and fire to kill them. If that wasn't enough, they turned to God with prayers, symbols, and pleas for protection, and sometimes they even abandoned infested places.

So when John calls his hearers a “brood of vipers,” he is naming something deadly that must be cleared away, sealed out, confronted, and if that is impossible, surrendered to God's fire.

For John it seems like the nearness of the kingdom and the severity of the warning are the same thing seen from different angles.

When the kingdom of heaven comes near, it is not simply that God appears, smiling avuncularly at whatever we happen to be doing. It is that the truth about God and the truth about us are suddenly in the same place. John is saying that this is a dangerous time for us. Because on that day we are truly revealed. And what then? Are we revealed to be a tree planted by living water with fruit worthy of repentance? Are we revealed to be a snake running away, hissing and baring our fangs of poison? Or are we somehow poised on that day to go either way to stay put or to flee, to be either a fruited branch or a deadly viper?

What then? What will we be then? Who would want to take a chance on such a critical point? This is, indeed, a dangerous place.

John appears in a dangerous place: “in the wilderness of Judea.” Not in the Temple courts or on the respectable streets of Jerusalem, where he belonged, really, as the child of a High Priest. Now he’s out where things are bare and exposed to the elements, where you don’t have much to hide behind. Out where you are indeed keeping one eye open for some viper hidden at your feet.

He looks as if he belongs there now.

The wilderness has left a mark on him, both on what he wears and what he eats. His clothes are beastly, camel’s hair. His food is locusts and wild honey. He is, simply, what happens when you stand long enough in the raw presence of God with no shelter and no distractions.

I can see why people came, from the big city, from the villages, to share in his extreme life. To somehow have this wild man in this wild place wash them clean in the Jordan, clean inside and out.

Whatever is going on in Jerusalem, or in the villages day after day, it is not enough. It is not answering their longing for something deeper and more true under Roman occupation. So the crowds go out, into the wilderness, because somewhere in them there is a sense that what is wrong with the world is also wrong with them, and that it must be named and washed for a fresh start.

And part of why they come, I suspect, is that somewhere deep down they are afraid that John may be right, that they may indeed be the snakes. Years of living under occupation have taken their toll. You do what you must to get by, to keep the children safe, to keep bread on the table, and you tell yourself it is only for a season. Then one day you look around, and it feels as if all the heroes are buried or in prison. The people left standing are the ones who have learned how to bend, how to turn a blind eye, how to live with a slow corrosion of the soul. Something has crept in with the compromises, a kind of poison in the bloodstream. They know they are not simply victims, not simply innocent sufferers.

There is something in them that has to be washed off, something that needs to die in that river so that when God comes near they will be more than a nest of survivors, more than a coil of frightened vipers, and can stand instead as a people made clean and ready.

Yet even in the middle of this severe word, there is a shocking hope John offers. When he says, “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father,” he is not simply taking away their last comfort. He’s moving that trust to a place beyond their comfort zone. If their comfort has been, “We belong to the right family, the right story, the true god,” John is saying: that was never what held you up. It was never your bloodline that parted seas or brought manna or called prophets out of nowhere. It was always the sheer, boundless power of God. “God is able” John says, “of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” So even if they feel as good as dead inside, even if their hearts have gone hard and cracked like the rocks of that desert, no matter. Stone is raw material for Him. God makes life out of nothing, you know, and he can make life out of your rubble. In other words, John is loosening their grip on the comfortable family tree so that they can finally be grafted, heart and soul, into God. “Do not trust the story you tell yourselves about your identity. Trust the God who can take what is calcified in you and make it sing, who can raise up a living people from the dust and gravel under your feet.”

Then John gives us another image. “His winnowing fork is in his hand.” A farmer’s fork for tossing grain into the air so that the heavy kernels fall back to the floor and the light, dead husks blow away as chaff.

“He will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

We often picture this as God sorting humanity into two piles, the good people and the bad people, and setting one pile on fire. Matthew does not say that. His picture is of wheat and chaff in the same heap, and a process that separates what can nourish life from what is only husk.

This fire that John preaches about is not arbitrary cruelty. It is the fire that destroys what has no future in God's kingdom. So the question is not merely “Are you wheat or chaff?” but “Where is the grain in you? What in you can bear the weight of God's love, can feed others, can belong in the granary of God's future?”

John is very clear that this work of sifting and burning and gathering is beyond him. “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 stands in the desert, deliberately, as a servant's servant. There is a kind of holy self-forgetfulness here. His whole identity is to point beyond himself. “I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Water can wash away dirt. It can soak and soften and refresh. It cannot change the inner structure of things. Fire can. Fire can penetrate and transform what it touches. It can burn away the husk and leave a different kind of solidity behind.

Just as real fire changes the inner structure of things in a chemical reaction, so even a small truth, once admitted, begins to work on us from the inside. You let in one honest recognition, and suddenly five other things can no longer stay as they were. Habits begin to look different, relationships feel different, your story about yourself will not quite hold. Then those changes trigger others, and the flame spreads, no longer under your tidy control. This is what the Spirit's fire is like. It does not simply warm the surface. It quietly makes you new in body, mind, and soul.

When John speaks of “the Holy Spirit and fire,” he is not promising a more intense religious mood. He is speaking of a presence that goes right to the roots, to the place where the axe is lying. A presence that will not be satisfied with the appearance of repentance, the temporary surge of feeling, but that burns away our evasions and leaves something solid and alive.

“The kingdom of heaven has come near.” God's own life, God's own future, is pressing in on the present. The world as it is, and you and I as we are, cannot simply remain unaltered under that pressure, the pressure of “Emmanuel” translated “God with us.”

Perhaps the most faithful thing we can do is simply to stop resisting the Emmanuel heat. To admit that we do not yet look like the future God intends, and that this is precisely why the Spirit has come. And as we yield, bit by bit, may we discover that the fire is not our enemy at all, but the very form that divine love takes when it refuses to leave us unchanged.
