

FROM THE CENTER TO THE MARGINS
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Text: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 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.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “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 will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING in Matthew's gospel. John the Baptist has appeared out in the wilderness, and lots of people are coming from Jerusalem to see him. And what's strange about that is, it's the opposite of how things usually worked back then.

Important things usually happened in Jerusalem because that was the center of power—political power, economic power, religious power. So, if something important was happening, and people were coming to see it, they'd be coming from the surrounding countryside. But when John appears, the pattern is reversed. The important thing is happening, not in Jerusalem, but out in the middle of nowhere; and the movement of people coming to see it isn't from the margins to the center, it's from the center to the margins.

And what's more, the thing that's happening out there has nothing whatsoever to do with power. People aren't coming to see the coronation of a king or to participate in a festival. They're coming to hear a lowly preacher—someone with no money, no credentials, no authority; someone dressed in rags; someone who forages for his food and eats whatever he can find.

But there's something about him, something so compelling that people just can't stay away. In fact, John attracts such a following that eventually a bunch

of leaders from the temple come poking around to see what all the fuss is about.

So, what's going on here? What's the point of this reversal? Well, it has to do with the fact that in scripture, the wilderness is not what most people today think of when we hear that word. We think of a literal place, like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon or the Adirondacks, and that's pretty much it.

But in scripture, the wilderness is more than a literal place. It's a symbolic place—a place where people sometimes find themselves in life. A place where they feel lost and vulnerable. A place where they're not in control anymore, and they struggle with doubt and fear. Which is why people often have their most intense and transformative encounters with God in the wilderness, when then going through one of these times of upheaval. Because it opens them up to God in a deeper way.

Think about the Israelites. They fled into the wilderness when they left Egypt, and for them it was a place where nothing made sense anymore, where everything familiar and comforting was gone, where they didn't know how they were going to survive from one day to the next. But it was also the place where God dwelled among them; and led them day and night with pillars of cloud and fire; and sustained them with manna from heaven; and gave them the law and the commandments. It was the place where they

found out who God was, and who they were, and where they learned to trust God and live by faith.

THAT'S WHY JOHN SETS up his baptizing operation, not in Jerusalem, but 30 miles east of Jerusalem, where the Jordan River flows through the desert, and there's nothing around but rocks and sand. He wants to reverse the usual pattern. He wants people to come from the center to the margins, not the other way around. He wants them to leave behind their safe, comfortable lives and be in a place that represents the kind of experience their ancestors had—the experience of being powerless to decide what happens to them; the experience of not having a path to follow; the experience of being completely dependent on God for everything. Because he knows it'll open them up to God in a deeper way—just like it did for me when I had my wilderness experience.

When I left ministry five years ago and went into trucking, I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought I had it all figured out. But then trucking wasn't what I thought it would be, and I didn't have a backup plan, and I was terrified. I didn't know how I was going to make a living. I thought my wife and I were going to lose our home. I thought we weren't going to be able to put our kids through college. I thought I'd made the worst mistake of my life.

So, I turned to God out of sheer desperation and started praying. And from that moment on, it was like a path opened up in front of me—a path that led back to ministry, which I still wasn't sure I wanted to do. But the way things just fell into place, it gave me the confidence I needed to go where God was leading.

And that feeling has stayed with me. I'm not as anxious today as I used to be. I'm not as much of a worrier. I have this sense now that I don't have to be in control of my life because I know that God is. And God's way better at putting me where I need to be than I ever was.

So the center is a place where we're in control. A place that's familiar and comfortable. A place where we like things just the way they are. Which means it's a place where God has a hard time reaching us, and change isn't very likely.

The margins are just the opposite. They're a place of wandering. They're a place where we don't know what to do. They're a place where we have to depend on something beyond ourselves. Which means they're a place where God can work on us, and change is possible. We can go from holding on to our lives with a death grip to letting go and realizing we were in God's hands all along. Which explains what

the deal is with these leaders from the temple and why they come poking around.

Most translations say they're "coming for baptism," but that phrase can just as easily mean "coming against baptism," which is probably more accurate. These guys don't want to be baptized by John. They want to keep John from baptizing anyone else. Because what he's offering is a new kind of closeness with God. No temple required. No complex system of rules and regulations required. And no leaders like them required. Just repentance and water and God's mercy.

So, they're coming to deal with this threat to their authority. They're coming to secure their positions. But John sees right through them, and he tells them their power doesn't matter. All that matters is whether they're willing to be transformed. And clearly they're not. They don't want to give up the center. Which is sad. It means they'll never experience anything more.

What about you, then? Are you ready to give up the center? Are you ready to go out to the margins and have your own wilderness experiences?

I know it sounds like a lot, but it doesn't have to be. You don't have to do anything big and dramatic. You can take little steps outside your comfort zones—little steps that put you in places of vulnerability and open you up to God. You can volunteer somewhere where you're a little bit out of your element. You can start a conversation with someone whose life is nothing like yours. You can face something you've been avoiding: a strained relationship; a change you've been putting off.

And now is the perfect time. Advent is all about preparing our hearts for the coming of the Lord, and this is one way you can do that. You can put yourselves in places where God can work on you, and you can be transformed.

Let's pray: God of the wilderness, you meet us in places we wouldn't necessarily choose—places where we're not in control, where we feel vulnerable, where we have to depend on you. Give us courage to leave the center and go where you lead us. Transform us in those wilderness places. Open our eyes to see what we couldn't see before. Open our hearts to trust you more deeply. And when we return to our everyday lives, help us to bring that transformation with us—to live with less fear and more faith. Prepare us, O God, for the coming of the Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.