

Sermon December 7, 2025

the message

We have entered a brand new season in a brand new year, my friends. Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of PEACE. I have something to show you. Roll out a piece of purple or blue felt, depending on what color your church uses for this season, and place it on the floor in front of you. This is the color you will see here in our sanctuary for the next four weeks. It is the color of Advent. Advent is the season of preparing and waiting. It is different from what the ads on tv say we are waiting for, different from what the billboards tell us to prepare for. We are God's people and Advent is our time to prepare and wait for the coming of Jesus. Yes, we are still people that live in this world, who get to be part of the decorating, gift wrapping, party-going, and card sending. But our hearts and our souls are waiting for more. We are waiting for Jesus and what Jesus brings. I have a story to tell you. Pull out a small figure to represent John the Baptist and place it on the felt. Make sure it isn't one that is fragile in case the children hold it. Have a little piece of something fuzzy you can wrap around the figure. Today's story drops us into a conversation John the Baptist was having. Place a piece of blue ribbon or yarn across the felt to represent the Jordan River. John was beside this river, which we call the Jordan River. He was an interesting man. He wore clothes made out of camel's hair. Wrap the fuzzy cloth around the figure. This was unusual. It looked different from what most people would wear in that time. It was a symbol; a symbol of humility. John was telling people what mattered most to him with his clothing. He ate unusual foods- locusts and wild honey. People noticed him in his unusual ways of living. But more than that, they noticed what he DID. He was at the Jordan River, baptizing people and telling them important messages. Remember when we've talked about the Sadducees and the Pharisees? They were people who really loved the laws they made based on what they thought God wanted. They were more comfortable with those ways of living than they were with actually learning what God wanted. When they came to John to be baptized, John had things to tell them. He wanted them to know God for who God

really is, not this pretend deity they had created. So John said things like: You children of snakes! Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives! And yet, people kept coming to John. Even though he dressed differently. Even though he ate unusual foods. Even though he told some people that they were not living the right way. Why would people keep coming? Does this sound peaceful? Allow responses? That wasn't all that John the Baptist said and did, though. He told the gathered people other things, such as: God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The people were hungry for this information. Someone holier than John? Someone who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire? Someone who is stronger? What can this person do? Will this one be the ONE? Will this one bring peace and justice? The people kept coming, ready for this change. They wanted to know more. Their hearts were ready; they just needed to know who was coming, when they were coming, and what to look for. What John was telling them was too wonderful and they could not get enough.

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."

New Growth

We've heard the story so many times that it has lost its power to shock or surprise us. But, try to picture what people would think as a raggedy man dressed in camel fur with locusts and honey on his breath. He bursts out of the wilderness. "Repent," he cries out, "the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

The people had waited for a King for so long. Isaiah promised that the day would come when a new Kingdom would be established. But, the one he described was not the great leader who will march in and save us all. No, he said, a child will lead us. And God's New Kingdom will be established, not in power and glory, but in the smallest way imaginable: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

The Kingdom will not be like a tree that stands tall and strong. The Kingdom is more like the stump that is left behind after someone chops it down. A tree stump with a teeny, tiny twig growing out of it.

Small, weak and unwanted. These little shoots that grow out of stumps... we see them all the time and they are called "suckers," because they sap the strength from healthy trees. The Internet is filled with ideas of how to seal off a stump and prevent it from giving out these new shoots of life.

Israel's enemies had tried to seal off the stump of Jesse that was the root of the throne of David. They stopped any sign of new life before it had time to

take root and grow. They tried war and slavery, exile and imprisonment and starvation. There had not been a true king on the throne of Israel for generations. And the people longed for signs of life in that burnt-out old stump.

The signs were all around them, if they just looked in the right places. A star in the sky, angelic songs of praise... they all pointed to the child who would lead them. And yet, hopelessness froze their hearts. And the child grew into a man.

Right after this week's scripture, Jesus wades into the waters of the Jordan and ushers in a new time. The promised tiny shoot begins to sprout. It is so fragile and small that you can almost miss! If we don't nurture and care for it... protect it from a hostile environment, the whole thing could die. It is totally defenseless.

This is not the triumphant hero we all long for. Isaiah promises a new King of Israel, a king we now know is Jesus, and describes him as a fragile unwanted branch growing out of an ugly old stump. It's not a powerful image, but that's what our faith is all about. God, who could come to us in any way imaginable, but chose to come to Earth as a defenseless human baby and leaves it nailed helpless on a cross.

It doesn't seem like much of a beginning to a new Kingdom. A man in camel fur baptizing followers in muddy waters. Another young man, waiting on the edge of the crowd, ready to be baptized.. the one who will be our King. **It takes courage to believe.** The little shoot out of the stump could be cut down at any moment... it is so fragile and vulnerable. We need to be confident enough in God's ways to believe that the new growth will continue and grow into amazing things. A baby born becomes a man who will change our world. As he plunges deep into the water, a voice proclaims:

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And all of this began in the tiny shoot of the stump of Jesse

Out of that old stump, God grows a new Kingdom. A place where "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."

God's Kingdom, a place of peace and wholeness, has arrived. We are in a safe place, sheltered by the new branches that grow taller and taller.

Today John the Baptist descends like a furious storm. He arrives with locusts and vipers and axes and fire. Instead of promises of peace, of the wolf lying down with the lamb, we hear calls for repentance. We need to chop down and throw away those things that hold us back from new life. We need to make room for the new shoot of Jesse to grow up within us. That is how we prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist is not really preaching a message of condemnation, but one of liberation, of freedom from the thick, choking overgrowth in our lives that has trapped us in misery and hopelessness. Of allowing room for new shoots of life to grow.

And, suddenly, into the midst of the wilderness, a voice calls out: "This is my beloved Child," and a new Kingdom is ushered in

We need to wash away the past and move forward into the sunlight. And when we do, when we move forward in faith, God will be so pleased.

In the midst of calls for repentance, we are offered a new chance through baptism. As the fire of John's words pour out of his mouth, he also pours out the gentle stream of water on the heads of those who gather at the river, blessing them with the cleansing stream that promises the Living Water. He waters the potential of the believers, so that a new shoot of life might have the chance to blossom and grow in the form of God's own beloved child

Today the spirit of Christ is looking for fertile ground in which to grow up, a new shoot out of the old stump. Isaiah proclaims that "on that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

We can make ourselves that dwelling place, made glorious and new by Christ's presence. Let us dedicate ourselves to hosting the coming Christ within us, and we will find our faith growing in completely new ways that we never expected, newborn shoots of life bearing good fruit.

Let's be like Jesus, and branch out.

Invitation to Communion

During the Blitz in World War II Britain, when bombs showered down on the city, Operation Pied Piper evacuated many children to the country. Some remained in London and many of those were left parentless. Some were sheltered by a Jesuit order of brothers, who noticed the children had trouble sleeping, night after night. When the children were being put to bed one night, one of the brothers guessed the children's problem was that they were anxious because of uncertainty in their lives, and gave each child a small piece of bread, saying something like this –

"Hold on to your piece of bread while you are sleeping. Remember when you woke up this morning, we fed you and took care of you. When you wake up tomorrow, and we will be here for you. Let the bread remind you of this. Good night, children."

The children slept.

Beloved! Hear the Good News!

Come, be comforted
in the story of Bethlehem,
and in this the House of Bread.
Come to be comforted at this table
by a handful of bread
and a cup of love,
that will stay with you always.

Words of Remembering

We remember God's promises
of Emmanuel, and a branch of Jesse's root,
of Leader, Wisdom, Monarch,
Key of all that is locked,
and Dawn of every morning.

And we remember the sacred story,
that happened in the House of Bread
for a new mother
and a fostering father,
sheep and shepherds,
a few wise travelers with gifts
and many, many angels.

And we remember that the baby
named Jesus,
grew up to heal people,
and teach them with strange parables,
that made people angry.

We remember how he broke bread.
and poured wine and continues to love freely.

Prayer of Consecration

**Emmanuel, God with us,
in our lonely nights, under our guiding stars,
with the hopes and fears of all our years,
we come for comfort,
for peace of mind and peace on earth,
for a blessing on our hands and the bread in them,
on our lips and the cup we lift to it.**

Touch the bread before you, blessing it. Touch or pour and touch the cup before you, blessing it.

**May this bread and cup be your holy Life,
that we may ponder in our hearts,
and pray in our community.**

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Come, for this meal has been prepared just for you. Come to the House of Bread!