Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – December 7, 2025
Matthew 3:1-12
Repentance is not Cheap Grace

Every year, in church, just as the Christmas tree goes up and the garland is hung, as children begin bribing Amber for one of the better parts in the pageant, as candles are lit and carols are sung, with a spirit of warmth and joy in the air – we get a series of scripture lessons like this morning's, which don't feel quite… *festive*. You know, nothing says "Merry Christmas" like a strange, locust-breathed hermit shouting about Judgement Day. "Repent!" he hollers. "Repent – or burn!"

Well, *ho, ho, ho* to you, too. The one preparing the way for the Lord sure has a funny way of doing it. John the Baptist is the biblical equivalent of the weird, embarrassing great uncle who shows up at holiday dinners and says things that make everyone else feel uncomfortable. And by everyone, I mean *everyone.* He is visited by Pharisees and Sadducees – who are your quintessential good people, who are deeply pious people; they are already about as religious as anybody can possibly be, and still, they come to him, humbly seeking baptism. And he snarls at them! He says, "You think you're *so* righteous. All you are is firewood for Satan to heat hell with!"

It's not only the Pharisees and the Sadducees who are not religious enough for John the Baptist; even *Jesus* is not religious enough for him. Don't let that line about not being worthy to carry the Messiah's sandals fool you. Later on in the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist sends some of his followers to challenge Jesus, to ask Jesus why he, too, doesn't tell people to live in the desert and eat locusts. Jesus, John the Baptist complains, has too rich a diet. Jesus really needs to cut back on the dinner parties, on the wine and the mercy and the joy; if he wants to be seen as a *real* prophet, Jesus has to go harder on people. The voice crying out in the wilderness is the voice of a religious Scrooge whose call to repent is an off-putting "bah humbug."

More Christmases than not, when I look at the lectionary – at the calendar that determines which scriptures are read in church when – when I see the John the Baptist story pop up, I just skip it. I quietly replace it with something sweeter and merrier, maybe something with a nice angel in it. No one in the church knows or would care even if they did.

So, I could as well have skipped it, but this year, the story spoke to me. Or rather, John the Baptist spoke to me. And that word "repent!" – which, honestly, so often makes me a bit embarrassed to be a minister and to be a Christian – it spoke to me. It addressed itself to me. It did its work on me and in me. It just kept lodging itself deeper and deeper in my heart. And I can only guess that the reason is because I am a father now, and because, without ever intending to or even quite understanding why, I have found myself rocking my son in my arms and whispering, "I'll do better."

I don't know it's it him I'm talking to, or myself, or God – or if it matters. But it surprised me to hear myself saying this. Because, as far as sinners go, I think I'm a pretty ordinary one. And as far as fathers go, I'm probably solidly in the middle of the pack. There is no terrible vice or failing haunting me. I am not tormented by guilt. I am just a human being who wants to love

more fully than I know myself to be capable of loving. I want to love better as a father than I know I have loved as a husband, as a brother, as a son, and as a friend. I want to love my son more patiently and selflessly and energetically than I've ever managed to love anyone before.

What I actually *don't* want – at least right now – is for somebody to tell me that they're sure I'm a great dad and that parenting is hard and we all do the best we can and kids are resilient. I hope all that's true, in part, because it sounds like a sermon I've preached (probably several times!) already. But I want to do better. I want to love better. And I want to hold as tightly as I can to that intention and not let the Self-Help Industrial Complex convince me I can let go of it.

I want to set an ideal against my life that is actually bigger than my life, and I *want* to feel small and inadequate before it; I *want* to feel kind of bad about falling short of it. And not because I'm some kind of Puritan masochist, but because, well, what father doesn't want his son to think of him as his hero? Shouldn't a hero ask something heroic of himself? Shouldn't I strive to love my son heroically?

This deep, confused yearning is one that I know I can take to John the Baptist. John the Baptist is never going to try to make me just *feel* better. He is going to demand that I actually *be* better. He is going to stand at the edge of my consciousness with a wildness in his eyes, preaching "repent!" and holding constant before me the ideal and the calling that I *want* to rise to.

Some might think that feels like a burden, like a burden it will only ever prove impossible to bear up under. But, to me, it feels like a gift. If this fanatical prophet dressed like a caveman, holding people under water until they come up gasping and changed is right: God believes *more* is possible for me. God believes that I have it in me, that I actually have it in me, to live and to love with what in ancient times they called *greatness of soul*. God believes that I *can* grow to become this man. God believes that, deep down, I *am* this man. God sees the *me* in me that I want my son to see in me.

Emotionally, spiritually, morally – I don't have to settle for mediocrity. It is a gift to be thought so highly of by God. It is grace. Not cheap grace: "You're okay." It is costly grace. Grace that asks something of you. Grace that empowers you to be more, much more, than simply "okay."

When I meet with parents to talk about baptizing their children, almost all of them say something about wanting their kids to be a part of a community that will help them grow up to have good values. That's an excellent reason to have a child baptized. But I wonder now if the baptism isn't also, at some level, for them. If they don't come to this place where the practice of John the Baptist lives on, to this place where his voice naming moral aspiration not as dreary religious buzzkill-ism but as *the* great human quest still sounds – if they don't come to this place, here, to the church, because they, too, find themselves whispering promises in the ears of the babies in their arms: promises about the men and women they themselves will become, will work to become, will sacrifice to become, will change to become.

I wonder if they don't feel the same vague, almost inarticulate longing I feel – so deep and so elemental that the only words it can form itself into are "I'll do better." Repentance is born not of guilt and shame, but of longing and love, of desire; I wonder if they don't *desire* it, and, again,

not even understand totally what the desire is for except some kind of *better-ness*. I wonder if that's not why they're here. Why we're all here. Why *you're* here. Because you need to work on yourself, and need someone to assure you that this work will not be in vain. Because you need to repent in ways you don't even know you need to repent. Because you need to believe again that some miracle of change *is* possible in your life. Because you need to be reminded of the *you* God sees in you.

The Christian journey begins at the font – begins in the waters of baptism, begins with a blessing which is also an insistence: that the love poured out over each child and each one will demand of them growth, change, courage, and moral effort. The Christian journey is a lifelong metamorphosis of the self that continues on even after life ends. Along the way, to sustain us in our pilgrimage, to feed our good longings and empower our aspiring, there is the grace of this table…