

## Sermon Song: At the End of The Day

*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.”

I once went on a hike with a friend. We laced up our shoes, grabbed our hiking sticks and set voyage. Things were going really well until a few miles in when we suddenly realized that we hadn't seen a trail marker in a while. We had somehow wandered off the path. So we began frantically looking for some sign to help us find our way back again. I remember the feeling was a sense of urgency. And in the moment, what mattered most was getting back on the right path again.

Have you ever felt that urgent feeling before? Maybe it was in an emergency or a health crisis? Maybe it was when we found ourselves in a sobering moment, looking at our lives and thinking, “If things keep going in this direction it's not going to end well.” Or maybe we sense urgency when we see what is happening in our world. I mean, haven't environmental scientists begged us for decades to act with urgency. I mean, if floods and forests fires and hurricanes from A-Z every year don't create a sense of urgency in us, I honestly don't know what will. Maybe we felt a heightened urgency during Covid, or after George Floyd, or after yet another hate crime at a LGBTQ nightclub. All of them feel like urgent moments where we must get back on the right path for the sake of peace and our collective humanity.

**Verse 1: Lord, we live our life so blessed. To be the hope for those with less.  
At the end of the day, it's about giving up our greed. It's about planting one more seed.**

John the Baptist. Wild haired and crazy eyed, he stands on the fringes of society, announcing that something new— or someone new—is coming. It's a new kingdom for a new day. And he says, we better repent and get back on track or we might miss it.

To be honest, John the Baptist is a bit too intense for me. He calls religious people vipers. He says, if you think I'm intense, there's one coming after me with a pitchfork who will baptize you with fire. Now doesn't that sound fun! He says there will be a separation of the wheat from the chaff and the chaff will get tossed into the unquenchable bonfire. Merry Christmas!

Now I know we've all heard this before. We don't need another turn or burn sermon. It's not really good news. But what if? What if the statement is less about judgment and more about changing the way we perceive things? After all the word for repent in the Greek literally means, "to change our mindset or to turn and change our perspective."

Allow me to explain. Probably the scariest part of what John the Baptist says is that the wheat and the chaffs will be separated, and the chaff will be tossed into the fire. It sounds horrible right? But see it from a farmer's perspective and we learn that the chaffs or husks are an essential part of the wheat. You see, as wheat grows the chaff protects it from weather and parasites. The chaff is an essential and protective part of the wheat's development and growth. There is nothing bad about it. But when the wheat grows to maturity, the chaff has to be shed because it has served its purpose and is no longer necessary.

So when we hear about wheat and chaff being separated, it isn't that some of us are wheat and others are chaff. No! It is that we are all both wheat and chaff. And while the chaff part may have served us for a period of time, it needs to be shed because there is something new happening that doesn't require the old patterns or habits or traditions we once thought were essential. Why? Because we've outgrown them and if we cling to them, we won't be free enough to embrace what is coming. John the Baptist isn't saying turn or burn. He's inviting us to see things from a new perspective and let go of what we've outgrown for the sake of ours and others freedom.

**Verse 2: Lord, we live in this world so blessed. To be the light for those oppressed. At the end of the day, it's about all the life we lead. It's about the love we need. For justice. For righteousness. For worship. Our faithfulness.**

This is a far more radical invitation than we may have realized. It's the freedom of baptism: to let go of what isn't serving us personally or collectively anymore and to allow a new way to rise within us. There are ways of handling conflict that simply don't work anymore. There are some things written in our bibles that if we cling to could go against the grain of the gospel rather than with it. There are some things written in our constitution that may have served us well for a period of time but aren't serving us anymore. This is the tension we are invited into when discerning what God's kingdom is about.

So how do we know? If it isn't compassionate, we might have to let it go. If it isn't healing, we might have to let it go. If it excludes others, it is time to let it go. If it keeps us in cycles of violence or addicted to white supremacy or sexism or hateful homophobic rhetoric, it's time to let it go. Because if it isn't actually good news for everyone, it's probably not news worth listening to.

There is a new era coming and so it's time to ask: what have we outgrown? What is the chaff that may have been helpful for a season, but now is no longer useful? What do we need to let go of so we are free to embrace what is coming once again?

**Verse 3: Lord, we live in this world so blessed. To shine your light, in vast darkness.  
At the end of the day, it's about the joy we sing. It's about all the peace we bring.  
For justice. For righteousness. For worship. For faithfulness.**

**Our brothers. Our sisters. Our strangers. Our neighbors. Our widows. Our orphans.  
Oh, our soldiers. Our leaders. Our nations, relations. For justice for righteousness.**