

January 4, 2026

“Pursuing the Kingdom: Prepare the Way”

Matthew 3:1-12

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...[theme overview]

[summarize Matt. 1-2]

In essence, Matthew 1-2 establishes Jesus not as an isolated figure, but as the historical and prophetic culmination of Israel's covenant story, the true King who brings the promised restoration in the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

When considering the pursuit of this kingdom we first must discuss the preparation for its coming. Have you ever had to prepare or train really hard for something? Have you ever thought about the type of preparation it takes to get ready for running a marathon? Well, that's about all I've done is “think” about it. But the months and months of training to get your body in shape and ready for a 26.2 miles.

Well, the passage we're looking at today is the passage about preparation. Now, this isn't preparation for running a marathon. This is the preparation for the coming of a kingdom. This isn't going to involve training like a physical athlete, but the preparation here is nevertheless necessary.

When we think about it, I think we realize that this preparation probably has to involve some sort of religious rights and ceremonies, maybe like the baptism... In fact, we see John the Baptist baptizing with water in our passage today. What John is going to say is that this preparation goes beyond external and outward rites and ceremonies. The preparation is actually deeper than that. It is spiritual and it's absolutely essential if we want to be prepared for the coming of God's kingdom.

The issue that John the Baptist is going to focus in on in his role of preparing the way for the king is the issue of repentance. At first glance, this would seem out of order, or to some, even out of place. Some would say that this is something we don't necessarily think that we need. But the truth is we all need repentance and we're going to see that repentance is central to the message of the kingdom as we read through our passage today and as we make our way through the Gospel of Matthew. If you are able, would you stand with me in honor of God's word, as I read from the Gospel of Matthew 3:1-12. [Read Passage]

We are introduced here to John the Baptist rather abruptly. We know from the Gospel of Luke that John the Baptist has an entire back story. We're told there about John's parents, Elizabeth and Zachariah, and they are wonderful figures of faith through that story. Here we just abruptly are introduced to him. John has just dropped into this wilderness preaching and we suddenly meet him and have to learn about him as we go on the fly. As we do, Matthew introduces us to some interesting characteristics of John the Baptist.

First, Matthew tells us about his mission and very simply, the mission of John the Baptist is to prepare the way for the coming of the king. We see this a little bit in vs. 1 where we read that John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Now, this isn't just a comfortable place. He's not packing out a nice arena with flashing lights, a worship

band and fog machines. John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness to drive home a point, namely that God's people were still in the wilderness. They may have been back in the Promised Land for a few hundred years after the Babylonian captivity, but spiritually speaking, they were still in exile because of their sin, their rebellion and their disobedience.

We see this same pattern throughout all of scripture. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they were exiled out of the Garden of Eden into the wilderness. Later under Moses, when God's people refuse to believe and obey and enter into the Promised Land, God kept his people wandering in the wilderness for 40 years until those who did not trust in God died in the wilderness.

Then eventually after God's people entered into the promised land they forgot the Lord their God and rebelled against him by turning to the false gods of the nations around them and God once again sent his people into exile, scattering them and carrying off Judah into captivity in Babylon.

Well, they've returned from Babylon, and they are in the land of Canaan once again, the Promised Land, and yet they're still in the wilderness. They are still struggling with their sin and rebellion and John the Baptist's mission is to prepare the way for the promised king who has come to deliver them.

The second characteristic of John we see in this passage is his message in vs. 2-3. If his mission is to prepare the way for the king, his message is to "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Repent is the first word he uses, and it's really at the center of his ministry.

So what does repentance mean? Well, biblical repentance is a Spirit-worked change of mind (from the Greek, *metanoia*). So it's a "changing of the mind" about our sin leading to a decisive turning away from sin and toward Christ for salvation. It's not just feeling sorry for what we've done but a complete shift in purpose, emotion, and actions that results in new obedience that produces fruit. To put it another way, it's a change of mind that stems from a change of heart that spills into a total change of life.

Notice John the Baptist is preaching this need for repentance among the people of God. Why do they need to repent? Why is this part of the preparations for the coming of the King? Well, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Kingdom of Heaven is near. In fact, the king is just around the corner. We'll read about this King Jesus in the passage that we're going to look at next week. The king is near and John is pressing the people, are you ready for the arrival of this king?

So what is this Kingdom of Heaven? Well, as we said last week, it isn't a place. Normally when we think of a kingdom, we think of a place you find on a map. But it's not a place, it's a power. Or, as commentator Leon Morris puts it, "it's not a realm, it is a rule." It's wherever the reign and rule of God breaks into the hearts of his people. That's where the Kingdom of God is. It's here this morning in our midst and it's around the world as God's people are gathered to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and as people repent and submit to the king.

And what Matthew points out to us is that John's preaching is fulfilling a prophecy from the Old Testament. Matthew draws a connection to Isaiah 40:3, where Isaiah had written, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.'"

Matthew used this passage from Isaiah 40:3 to identify John the Baptist as the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. In this role, John's purpose was to prepare hearts for the Messiah, and to bring an awareness of sin among Israel so they could receive the salvation from sin offered by the Messiah.

This passage points to the building up a great road for the arrival of a majestic king. The idea is to fill in the holes and knock down the hills that are in the way. The commentator David Guzik writes on this passage, "The idea of preparing the way of the LORD is a word picture, because the real preparation must take place in our hearts. Building a road is very much like the preparation God must do in our hearts. They are both expensive, they both must deal with many different problems and environments, and they both take an expert engineer."

Jesus was the coming Messiah and King, and John the Baptist was the one crying in the wilderness, and through his message of repentance, he worked to prepare the way of the LORD. We often fail to appreciate how important the preparing work of the LORD is. Any great work of God begins with great preparation.

It's important to recognize that it isn't that the king is the one who needs the preparations. It's not as though the king is being stymied or being kept out of the city because we haven't made the appropriate preparations and he has to sort of wait out and twiddle his thumbs until we get our act together. No, the king needs no help at all. It's we who need to be prepared for the entrance of the King.

The third characteristic we find out about John the Baptist is his ministry. We see that the people are coming from all around to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. And we see that as they do so, at the end of vs. 6, they are confessing their sins. This isn't just an external, ritualistic event, this is a spiritual thing they are doing. And this is as John is going to say, in vs. 11, baptism with water for repentance.

Now, in the Old Testament, whenever you became unclean in some manner, you needed a "baptism," or a washing and there were a number of washings prescribed for a number of different situations. What John the Baptist is doing by this baptism of repentance is explaining that this isn't just a physical reality, you touched a corpse and now you were physically ceremonial and clean. He's saying your uncleanness is spiritual and it's in your soul, and you need to be purified and cleansed from your sins and repentance is a necessary part of that.

And so, preparation involves, as is pointed out for us here, both the repentance from our sin and the purification from our sin. Not just outward washing of water, but a deep spiritual cleansing that even John the Baptist is going to acknowledge he can't provide. King Jesus didn't need John to make his entrance, but the people needed John to prepare them for King Jesus. So the question is, are you ready for the coming of the king?

As we move into vs. 7-10, we shift from the importance of repentance to the fruit of repentance. Now, we've just met John the Baptist, and here we meet the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, for the first time. Matthew speaks of them more than any other gospel writer. So it's worth saying a few words about who they are to frame our understanding of these people going forward.

Everything we need to know about them, especially the Pharisees, come from this passage. We see that they are people who think themselves righteous, but who John

denounces as a “brood of vipers.” He essentially calls them snakes who do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

John accused these leaders of wanting to appear anxious for the Messiah, but not truly repenting and preparing their hearts. They think they're righteous, they act as though they are righteous, but they are, in fact, not righteous. And they think they are righteous because they are the biological children of Abraham.

What John says is that outward biological descent is not enough. It requires preparation for the coming of the king. It requires a deeper spiritual reality of bearing true spiritual fruit in preparation for the coming of the king.

You see, the Pharisees thought they could boil down the law to just principles and methods and if they just do all these things, if they check all the right boxes that they were in right standing with God. They did not understand that the law requires perfect holiness.

Now, if they truly understood this then they would have seen that it demolishes any hope of measuring up on your own for none of us are perfect or have the ability to be perfect. And this leads us to grace. Which is exactly the gospel that John the Baptist is preaching about the coming of Jesus, and that Jesus himself will proclaim during his earthly ministry and it's the same gospel of grace the Church has been proclaiming ever since.

We need to get rid of this idea that our righteousness before God is a physical kind of a thing. You read the right words, you sing the right songs and you've checked the right boxes. God requires something much more, the allegiance of your heart. To bring about a change of heart where you recognize your sin and you turn from it in full repentance to embrace the grace that is offered to you in Jesus Christ.

Now, John the Baptist talks here about bear bearing fruit in keeping with repentance. In other words, if a person has truly repented then their lives will reflect that change. Then he says a little bit later that right now the axe is laid at the roots. The Bible is always talking about the roots of our faith and the fruit of what grows from it. The roots are where we are drawing our strength from.

If we're still drawing on our old lives, if we're still drawing on our flesh and, on our strength, then the fruit we bear will continue to be just as evil as it always has been. That's what the Pharisees were trying to do. Their trees were unhealthy and they were continuing to bear bad fruit.

In the same way, if you're trying to live on your own strength, it doesn't work that way. But if the roots of your life sink into the rich soil of the gospel, where you acknowledge you can't do this on your own and you acknowledge you need Jesus and you turn from your sin and look to him in faith then your life will begin to reflect that truth. Preparing for the coming of the king requires us to see how short we fall from the glory of God because of our sin and to turn towards him in full repentance.

This, of course, raises the question how do I prepare for the coming of the king? And that's what John lays out in the last section, the spirit of repentance in vs. 11-12. The spirit of repentance is when John differentiates his baptism from the baptism of Jesus, the one who is coming. He says, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Now, John isn't separating the two baptisms but he is distinguishing them. One finds its fulfillment in the other. John's baptism was a water baptism for repentance, signifying a turning from sin to await the Messiah, while Jesus' baptism marked the fulfillment and transformation into a new covenant, introducing a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, initiating believers into Christ's kingdom and sealing them with the Spirit. John's was for the coming Kingdom; Jesus' baptism, in the Spirit, brings people into the Kingdom, incorporating them into His death, burial, and resurrection.

John also gives us a warning in vs. 12. In vs. 12 John warns his winnowing fork is in his hand. The winnowing fork is what was used to separate the wheat from the chaff by tossing it in the air to separate it. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Now, this emphasis on repentance is thought to be so unnecessary today because we live in a thoroughly therapeutic culture. What the world sees as good is helping you feel better about yourself. You don't need to change. You don't need to be transformed. You don't need to repent.

Well, the Word of God says otherwise. The Bible says you absolutely must change. That repentance is what you need to do to prepare for the coming of the king. This has been the message of the church throughout all her generations. The message of the kingdom begins with the words, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." And this has been the same message all the way through the history of the church ever since. The question is, are you ready for the king's arrival?

The Kingdom of Heaven is here already in the hearts and lives of his people. But the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet come in its fullness and glory which will take place with Jesus, the King, comes again. Are you ready for the king? Let us pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's table.