

The Second Sunday in Advent

December 8, 2019



Matthew 3: 1-12

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 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.’”

4 Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 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? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 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. 10 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.

11 “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. 12 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.”

A reflection by Noah Park, mission co-worker serving in Egypt

Matthew seems to be the most conservative among the Gospels. Jesus says, “I was sent only to ... the house of Israel.”¹ The original Jewish readers might have been conservative, but the Gospel is not; it is even rebellious. Its title in Greek reads “Genesis of Jesus Christ.” Yet Jesus, the new Adam, comes from a woman in the opposite order of Adam and Eve in Genesis.² This disruptiveness is foreshadowed both by the four odd women in chapter 1 and by the Magi from the East in chapter 2 of Matthew’s gospel. An internal commentary is added: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said ...” (Matt. 1:22, cf. 2:23). God’s being with us as Emmanuel is fulfilled scandalously.

¹ All quotations are from the *NRSV*.

² Herman C. Waetjen, *Matthew’s Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 15.

Today's story is a continuation with a change of focus from the "Genesis of the new Adam" to the "Genesis of the new Israel." John the Baptist appears at its hinge. "People of Jerusalem and all Judea" are coming to him. What is strange is that this forming of the new Israel does not occur at the end of the wilderness as in Deuteronomy. All come from the Promised Land instead. The reason is given: the genocide of the infants took place in Bethlehem, and God has already called God's son "out of Egypt" (Matt. 2:14). So, the Baptist can give people the baptism of repentance at the Jordan River, symbolizing the end of the past.

Soon arises a question: "Who forms part of the new Israel?" In the rebuke of the Pharisees and the Sadducees – actually to all the contemporary readers – the Baptist proclaims, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8). To the shock of the original Jewish readers, he discredits their firm belief that "We have Abraham as our ancestor" and declares, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3:9). The heart of this message is clear: becoming a member of the new Israel, one must translate repentance into good works. "The kingdom of heaven has come near." One must come into the reign of God, crossing the borderline.

In Egypt, people eat lunch between 2–4 p.m. as the main meal of the day. For those living on the seminary campus, lunch is a big part of life. A month ago, some students began to lead a discipleship meeting for younger workers who do not read well. After a while, I heard that both students and workers decided to give their lunch to the poor on the street once a week. This was such impressive and good news to me since they were crossing the borderline both between "the educated and uneducated," and "the haves and have-nots." I am so happy to see that they are doing good works together and coming into the "the kingdom of heaven" in Cairo.

After graduation, most students will be sent to small rural congregations. Borrowing a Matthean expression, they will work as "prophets, sages, and teachers" (Matt. 23:34). Their ministries will not be easy at all as we teachers know. Yet, I trust this: as they keep on crossing the borderline doing good works, they will be empowered by the promised baptism of "the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11). I also pray that wherever they are in their ministries, the kingdom of heaven is experienced among our Egyptian sisters and brothers who have been a minority group for more than a thousand years.

Noah

To learn more about Noah's ministry, visit pcusa.org/park-shin.