

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 7, 2025

“One Who Is More Powerful Than I Is Coming”
Matthew 3:1-12

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

I once played the role of John the Baptist in a theatrical production. With the costume beard, fake camel fur, and long wooden staff—I absolutely looked the part (minus the grasshoppers). I was also, I would add, several feet taller than my fellow actors—because that year, in my church in Montreal, I was cast as the only adult in the children’s Christmas pageant. In fact, it was my job to begin the pageant by stepping out onto stage (barefoot) and delivering my one and only line.

I had an important role; a lot was riding on this; and I certainly didn’t want to disappoint my six-year-old colleagues. So when I was instructed to *shout* my line and *slam* my wooden staff against the floor, I took that seriously. The night of our pageant, I strode out on stage, yelled out, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”—and then brought down my staff with a crash...with the immediate result that a baby started to cry. I felt bad about that—but then I figured, ‘Hey, if you play John the Baptist and nobody cries—did you really play John the Baptist?’

Every Advent, John the Baptist arrives, on this Second Sunday; but his arrival makes us uncomfortable, unsettled, unsure. In fact, John the Baptist can make us so uncomfortable that his presence might be unwelcome; maybe we’d rather avoid John the Baptist altogether. I heard that my church in Montreal later dropped John the Baptist from the Christmas pageant; I don’t know what led to that decision (though my, ahem, energetic portrayal might have been a factor).

But what is it about John the Baptist that makes us uncomfortable? I think this goes way beyond superficial awkwardness around John’s strange habits, the grasshoppers and all that. I think there’s something deeper—something that’s usually left unacknowledged or unnamed—that leaves us unsettled by the presence of John the Baptist.

And it’s not just that John speaks a message of judgment. As Christians, we understand that God’s judgment is never opposed to God’s love; to the contrary, it is *because* God loves the world that God speaks judgment against injustice and lovelessness. God loves the world too much to abandon us to our sinfulness, so God has raised up prophets to speak judgment for our good. Yet there *is* something else about John’s message that makes us uncomfortable...

Now John was a gripping preacher who proclaimed a message that no one would soon forget; he used visceral images and arresting language: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John asks. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance. [...] 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. [...] [O]ne who is more powerful than I is coming after me [...] 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” (vv. 8, 10-12).

John’s message is a warning—an urgent warning—calling everyone to change their ways and turn to God before it’s too late, calling for repentance now to escape destruction soon. And John uses that image of a tree: those that bear the fruit of a faithful life will be spared, whereas the rest are

deadwood slated for destruction; the chainsaw is coming, John warns, to cut down those fruitless trees marked with that fateful red X.

And I think here's where we begin to discern that deeper reason for our discomfort—and I wonder if this has occurred to you, at some point and at some level. As we listen to John the Baptist in Advent, does something seem somehow off, somehow incongruent about John's expectations of the coming Saviour? Does John's message fully reflect the reality of Christ—or is his message incomplete, missing something important about the Saviour drawing near? From our vantage, as we reflect on Christ's redeeming work, we know that Christ confronted the sin and brokenness of our world—but did Christ's treatment of sinners look like an axe against a tree?

John set his hopes on the coming Saviour, certain that this broken world would be set right by the One to come. Yet it seems that John expected a Saviour who would confront sin by discarding the sinful, who would overcome the brokenness of our world by casting away those who are broken. It seems that even John—in all his faithfulness, in all his prophetic imagination—even he could not yet imagine that the Saviour would meet us in our sin and brokenness, not by casting us away but by drawing us in, not by destroying but by healing and restoring.

In the end, this coming Saviour would redeem humanity—not by unleashing the consequences of sin against us but by absorbing the consequences of sin into himself. The Saviour John awaited is the One of whom St. Paul would later write: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In his faithful expectation, John awaited a Saviour who would come to confront a broken and sinful world; yet, in a way that even John could not imagine, this Saviour's judgment would not destroy but rather redeem—and mercifully enable us to begin again. John the Baptist envisioned a day when the Saviour would come like an axe to cut down fruitless trees; instead, that Saviour would one day tell the story of a gardener who wouldn't give up on a fruitless tree, but instead desired to tend it and to restore it to life (Luke 13:6-9; cf. Calvin). The red X on the tree turned out, in the end, to be the sign of the cross. Jesus ultimately “fulfill[s] John's expectations by exceeding them” (Donaldson).

John the Baptist is honoured in the tradition of the church; he has often been understood as the last of the prophets, the last in a long line of prophets whose hopes pointed toward Christ. In one famous painting by the Renaissance artist Matthias Grünewald, John stands next to the crucified Christ—the Scriptures in John's one hand, his other hand pointing in expectation to the One who would come. And yet, such is the astounding love of God that the grace revealed in Christ exceeded anything even John the Baptist could imagine; such is God's compassion and mercy that even John the Baptist could not set his prophetic sights high enough to imagine what God would yet accomplish in Christ. The fact is that the gift of the Saviour was grace beyond anything that—in the end—anyone could imagine.

John the Baptist's expectation of Christ was incomplete—and so is ours. As the church, we look back at the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ—and we see how God's redeeming grace unfolded in ways even John couldn't have hoped. Yet nonetheless, even from our vantage, our knowledge of the grace of God is always incomplete: “For we know only in part,” as St. Paul wrote. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12).

And as we learn from John, no matter how high we set our hopes in God, the grace of God will always surpass anything “we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). If even the hopes of John the Baptist, the last of that long line of prophets, were not met but extravagantly exceeded—just imagine

how our highest hopes in God will, in the end, be outshone and outdone by the grace of God. Such is God's grace that John expected the Saviour to come like an axe against a tree; and yet—to his amazement, and ours—the Saviour came instead as a baby born in a stable.

And you know, this makes me think a little differently about my portrayal of John the Baptist in that Christmas pageant in Montreal all those years ago. I came out on stage slamming down that wooden staff with a smash, and yelling out the words of John the Baptist. Yet as the only response, in that otherwise silent Sanctuary, came the sound of a baby's cry.