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Matthew 3:1-12
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The Path out of Exile

Good Morning Church. Today on this second Sunday of Advent, we're getting ready for Jesus. And who better to help us get prepared than John the Baptist? Jesus's cousin, baptizer, and opening act.

As I start reading this text, I am struck first by the Prophet Isaiah's words. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" These are the words Isaiah spoke from exile, proclaiming that there is a way out of captivity in Babylon. That there is hope for the people of God to make a journey home. Another journey through the wilderness, like Moses took the Israelites during the Exodus. But the readers are not ready to make that journey yet, we've got to get ready first.

John gets people ready by baptizing them. Now, John's baptism is not the same as we think about it today, a once-and-done ritual that happens as an infant or adult, depending on your denomination. No, for John, baptism is a cleansing ritual. Like washing your hands. But, like the stories of going on a journey, fruit trees, and wheat threshing it's a metaphor. Yes, we should wash our hands and our whole bodies, but John's baptism is about washing our minds.

John talks about confessing sins and repentance, but I worry that we can get lost in the medieval and modern ideas of feeling shame around these words. Repentance is not about feeling bad about yourself, it's about turning around, and making a change in your life for the better. Better, I like the metaphor of getting ready for a journey.

What do you need to do to get prepared for a journey? You got to get properly dressed for whatever your doing; maybe pack a jacket if you're headed up into the mountains, a good pair of shoes and a cane for a walk, and some snacks, and water to keep your strength up. But almost as important as what you bring is what you leave behind. Don't bring that heavy pack full of rocks. Don't bring all your problems into the wilderness; leave them at home, they'll be here when you get back.

John the Baptist is gathering people together for a journey. He's dressed like the prophet Elijah. He's proclaiming a message of hope, reminding people of Isaiah 40, where the prophet declares a

path out of exile in Babylon back to Isreal. However, he wants to leave the chaff and bad fruit behind.

And I think this text is also telling me that my journey of growth is never-ending. The Pharisees and Sadducees were religious leaders who thought they had it all together. They knew the scriptures, they had the lineage, and they had power and respect. However, God is not asking for the people who have it all together; God is asking us to be wise, to keep recorrecting, and to keep an open heart for the new thing that God is doing in Christ Jesus.

As we get ready for the coming of Christ on Christmas Day, I wonder if we can think about this as leaving parts of ourselves behind. Are their habits that weigh us down like rocks on our backs? Are there feelings of guilt that we need to confess so that we can move on with our lives? What is not bearing good fruit in your lives? Let us joyously take the prophet's path out of exile and into the kind of world that Jesus is dreaming of.