

Gospel lesson

We turn today to the Gospel of Matthew, as John the Baptist prepares the people for Jesus's ministry:



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/qnpi-012-john-baptist/>;
credit: Good News Productions International and College Press Publishing

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

³This 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.'"

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But 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."

The word of God for the people of God

<Children's/Interactive Time>

Do you like to receive Christmas cards? Why?

<Let them respond>

Do you like to send Christmas cards?

<Let them respond>

Each year I mail out cards to family and friends who live some distance away from us. I write up a letter summarizing how the year went for us and enclose it in each of the cards. What do you think is the benefit of doing that? <Let them respond>

It is a sharing of my life story with those I love who miss out on much of it. Do you think I dwell more on my failures or on joys/successes in it? What would you focus on, if you wrote one? <Let them respond>

I include both major disappointments and joys from the year, significant events shaping our lives, spun in a positive light and with relevant pictures. It helps them to feel more closely connected with me, even as they go about distracted by other things in their lives.

What kind of things are included in the Bible?
<Let them respond>

Why do you think God included all those things in the Bible? <Let them respond>

I believe God wants a relationship with us and uses the Bible as a means to help us feel more closely connected with our Lord, even as we go about distracted by other things in our lives. I hope we all find many reasons to love God through the stories we hear and the many blessings in our lives, in this

season and always.

<Hymn "Hail to the Lord's Anointed"

UMH #203>

Message: Signs and Stories



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/toda-la-tierra-espera/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Holy Lord whose coming we await,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That our lives may tell the story of Your great news.
Amen.

We pick up our Advent series today with "Signs and Stories":

"Once upon a time... Not exactly words we associate with the Bible, but certainly words we associate with telling a story...[A] wonder of stories is that they communicate truths deeper than mere facts. ~~I wonder if~~ [Do we] sometimes we get so caught up in the Bible as a telling of events that we miss the truth underneath the events?"



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/solomon-moody/>;
credit: Moody Publishers

Once upon a time there was a people who were ruled by descendants of Jesse, beginning with King David. Identifying themselves as the Chosen People, they were abundantly blessed by God, who loved them. Some might even call the blessings overindulgent, because the leadership started taking their relationship with God for granted.

God got so angry at the way the kings acted that after many warnings, God finally let them suffer the consequences of their actions: the kingdom was overrun by enemies, the leadership destroyed, and the people sent into exile.

While the people were in exile, losing hope and beginning to lose their identity, God sent prophets to help them live again as God's people. We heard words from the prophet Isaiah today:



picture from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2016-09-04_14_01_58_Balsam_Fir_seedling_growing_out_of_a_stump_along_the_Van_Hoevenberg_Trail_about_6.4_miles_south_of_the_trailhead_in_Keene,_Essex_County,_New_York.jpg; credit: Famartin

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding...His delight shall be in the fear of

the Lord... Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

The people in exile expected this to be a military hero who would reestablish the kingdom of Israel as a political power. We hear the psalmist asking God to bless the king and the king's son, that they may better care for the people; this song would have been known by the people in exile, setting their expectations of how God's people should live.

Yet while they were eventually able to return to their homeland, they did not again have an independent king like David. God restored the people by having them look to God as their ultimate ruler.



picture from <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/59908-peaceable-kingdom>;
credit: Edward Hicks

The fairytale-like imagery of predator and prey living in harmony, the child safe around the serpent (which was a curse to humanity from the time of creation), the people essentially living happily ever after – these gave hope to people in turmoil.

I love to note that our awesome God, unlimited by the created dimension of time, always seems to do things with multiple applications through the ages. Paul recognized this, writing to the Romans that “For

whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

Thus, the hope for the people in exile is our hope as well, especially in these politically turbulent times. God is humanity’s ultimate ruler and will bring us to peace, blessed through love with harmony and joy.

It will not be what we traditionally imagine, with human rulers esteemed above the masses or any lineage deemed better than others. Racism, greed, pride, and any other sin you want to name will be eliminated.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/vb-john-1/>;
credit: VideoBible.com

John the Baptist warned [the leaders of the faith in his day] not to rely on their bloodlines for their status before God. Even today, when we think about DNA and genetic traits, we know that our Creator can bring anything into existence from nothing – and God can eliminate anything God chooses to destroy.

It is only through God’s grace that we exist, let alone flourish. If we choose to destroy what God has created, whether physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, or any other way possible, do you not think God will act to stop that destruction? Fred

Rogers said that in times of tragedy, that we can always look for those who are helping (his heroes).

When you see sin happening, who do you see God working through to stop it? Is God calling us to action in nudging us to notice? When we see people today who are struggling, let us move beyond “thoughts and prayers” to bring God’s hope to them.



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/toda-la-tierra-espera/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-graphics>

We learn about God through the stories of the Bible *and* through the love shown by others around us. Paul called for believers to “live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What story have you been telling with your life? Is it the story of God’s love and grace, or one of sinful pride and greed? For most of us, it is probably a mix of them, with us somewhere in the middle.

Ponder how you personally can better share the love of Jesus with your neighbor, that they too can hear and see the Holy Spirit in action and know the story of God’s grace – in this world and our hope for the world to come.

