

## Title: “The Wilderness and The River”

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Matthew 3:2

//2022

**Service Readings:** 1 Peter 3:18-22, Matthew 3

*Today is Ash Wednesday and if you listen closely you can hear John's words echoing throughout the church. He is calling us to repent; to turn back to God. We might think of ourselves as wandering through the desert and he's calling for us to return to the waters of our own baptism, the one instituted by Jesus and applied to us by God himself.*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

<sup>3</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John's location for his preaching that day was intentional. He was out in the wilderness, standing in the Jordan river. Any Israelite would immediately connect this to their ancestors of the Old Testament. You see, after the exodus from Egypt Moses led his people, their forefathers, out into the wilderness and straight towards the promised land. It was to be an easy journey: take a right out of Egypt, swing down to Mt. Sinai, turn left at the mountain and keep going until you see milk and honey. Even more, they didn't need a map because God led them, himself. Pillar of smoke by day and fire by night. But the journey didn't work out quite as planned. Even though they started with the best of intentions, and even though they tried hard to trust God, they just couldn't keep their focus on him. They began to complain, to question God's decisions, to not trust him. And so, they were prohibited from entering the land he had reserved for them and instead were made to wander forty years. But eventually God did lead them into the land and over the next 1600 years Scripture records a never-ending cycle where the Israelites would obey and then disobey God. Over and over again this pattern would play out: they would turn away from him, and then back towards him in repentance. And every time God would forgive and bless them.

And so, John's location underscored the message he was preaching that day. God's people, after thousands of years, had once again largely dismissed their God and were spiritually wandering in

the wilderness and John was calling them back. His message was clear: cease wandering. Repent and enter back into a relationship with their God. And he emphasized this message by offering baptism in the Jordan – the same river that their ancestors crossed as they entered the land God had given to them. This baptism, John’s baptism, was one of repentance. It was a very different one than what Jesus would institute and we receive today, but it was a sign of repentance and a symbol that made sense to them in that day.

And this is the context in which Jesus enters the scene. From Galilee he arrives in the wilderness. He leaves the city to be with those who have received John’s call.

<sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him,<sup>[a]</sup> and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

And so, when Jesus shows up and meets John, he connects the message of John’s repentance to himself. He receives John’s baptism, not because he needs repentance but as a concession in his state of humility. Jesus receives a baptism meant for sinners because he shall be the sin-bearer. He shall bear our sins and receive God’s judgement. And through his death and resurrection he will institute a new baptism, one that is not simply for repentance but for everlasting life. He will invite us to cross not through the waters of the Jordan but through the blood of his sacrifice where he will seal us with the promise of eternal life on the last day.

<pause>

Today is Ash Wednesday and if you listen closely you can hear John’s words echoing throughout the church. He is calling us to repent; to turn back to God. We might think of ourselves as wandering through the desert and he’s calling for us to return to the waters of our own baptism, the one instituted by Jesus and applied to us by God himself. Can you hear him? As we enter this season of Lent, he reminds us to assess the focuses of our lives, the priorities, and the various gods that we have constructed over the past year. Where have we begun to wander away from Jesus and follow our own paths? Where have we turned from him in favor of some worldly treasure? The answers to those questions can usually be found in the pages of our bank statements and calendars. Over the next 40 days we are reminded to spend time in self-reflection, seeking the areas of our lives where we have become disobedient, and turning back to him in repentance and asking for his forgiveness.

Ash Wednesday is also a day when we are invited to be marked with ashes, a mark that symbolizes three things: our sinfulness, our mortality, and our redemption. We are sinful, fallen creatures that have turned from God in all our ways. Paul writes in his letter to the Roman church:

<sup>15</sup> I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup> And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.<sup>[a]</sup> For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do

the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Our sinfulness leads to death: “Remember that we are dust and unto dust we shall return.” And as hard as we try, we find it impossible to obey God. We simply cannot meet his expectations. But thanks be to God, there is one who could. He was not only sinless but he bore *our* sins. He was crucified – for you. He conquered death through his resurrection – for you. And in doing so, he has taken the ashes of our sinful past and created in us new life – a life that in him *does* meet the demands of God. We are redeemed, washed by the blood of Jesus, declared justified, and marked as God’s own. And so the ashes that you may wear today are a reminder not just of your sin, but of your redemption. You are no longer wandering – Jesus has come and rescued you. He has led you back to himself. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

Please pray with me.

- <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God,  
    according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
    blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity  
    and cleanse me from my sin.
- <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
    and my sin is always before me.
- <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned  
    and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are right in your verdict  
    and justified when you judge.
- <sup>7</sup> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
    wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- <sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
    and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me from your presence  
    or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
    and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Amen.