

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 4, 2022

*II Advent, Matthew 3:1-12*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

The wild man hollers at the riverside, preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”<sup>i</sup> To reinforce that sermon, Matthew overlays the scene with Isaiah’s “Comfort, O comfort my people”<sup>ii</sup> passage, a verse we Christians will center during Advent and Christmas.<sup>iii</sup> Even so, let us step back from its reference in today’s Gospel and approach the text in the style of virtuoso deadpan Christopher Walken.

I invite you to pick up a bible from the pew rack, and, if you like, turn to Isaiah, chapter 40 ... Isaiah, chapter 40, on page 517 of the Hebrew Testament. For those worshiping from home, you might open another window and visit the website [oremus.org/bible](http://oremus.org/bible) [my go-to] which defaults to the same New Revised Standard Version that is in our pews ... [oremus.org/bible](http://oremus.org/bible) ... searching by “Isaiah 40.”

While you thumb those pages or feather your keys, know that Walken – who has delivered a half-century of brilliance, in moods ranging from *The Deer Hunter* to Saturday Night Live sketches<sup>iv</sup> – famously removes moviemakers’ punctuation from his scripts, exempting himself from the directive cues of commas and semi-colons and hard-stop periods.<sup>v</sup> Instead, he makes his own marks, building his signature cadence sound-by-sound.

Reviewing Isaiah in our bibles [once more, chapter 40, verse 3], note that the translation locates the colon after “cries out” and opens the quotation before “In the wilderness.” That full sentence read in context: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”<sup>vi</sup> This reading emphasizes the readers’ and hearers’ responsibility to prepare for the Lord’s way – *our* call to make a road whether we find ourselves overwhelmed by our lives’ clutter or isolated by our selfishness.

Maybe dogear your bible to that Isaiah passage [we will return to it] and open to the Gospel text as printed in your Worship Booklet. Here, Matthew interprets Isaiah to foretell John as “the one of whom [the prophet] spoke.”<sup>vii</sup> Relocating the colon after “wilderness” and before “Prepare the way,” the Matthaean translation posits John as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the one God has appointed to testify from the edge of the civilized world. Now reading the whole sentence in *this* context, “The [voice] crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”<sup>viii</sup>

Hear that difference?

As the Gospel begins, Matthew chooses to credential John with ancient authority, reinforcing the interpretation by emphasizing John's wilderness-ness, pointing to his camel's hair coat and leather belt, his appetite for locust and honey.<sup>ix</sup> The next verse's detail accomplishes the same, reiterating John's faraway post where the Judeans must "go out" to reach him.<sup>x</sup> Even John's imagery to describe his baptismal candidates – "You brood of vipers!" – endorses Matthew's chosen priority.<sup>xi</sup>

And then the Gospel pivots.

With the single-sentence, eighth verse – "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" – the lesson's weight forcefully shifts from John's *identity* to John's *message*.<sup>xii</sup> The Baptist warns the Abrahamic leadership against depending upon their heritage as a qualifier for fidelity, as though they and their ancestors have collectively banked sufficient holiness to pay forward their right relationship with God [When I served as a summer-camp counselor and participated in daily worship, I hoped this principle might hold true and excuse my Sunday attendance during intervening academic years ... turns out, that's not how it works!]. Instead, John challenges them to *demonstrate* their righteousness, and he stirs their urgency: "Even now," he cries out – not soon, not tomorrow – "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."<sup>xiii</sup>

This ax image again echoes Isaiah and the prophet's call to make a path *through* the forest. Rather than accepting a crooked road that allows pride and entitlement to stay standing, John calls for the faithful to make the way *straight*, to cut down infidelities and not merely to steer around them. Keep in mind that John delivers this sermon specifically to the "many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism;" he calls *them* to search *themselves*: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."<sup>xiv</sup>

With this anticipation, John torques the symbology of his ministry: his baptism can rinse away sin, yet it will prove a mere surface washing if the repentant do not, then, fully invest themselves in God's way. John explains that his ministry – even if good, even if *essential* – remains only a beginning, for just as we must not allow our sin to stay standing ... just as we must keep at the straight-making work of clearing our wild hearts ... in baptism we do not choose righteousness only once! Of course not. In baptism, we devote ourselves to God immediately and always.

To emphasize the ongoing constancy such faith requires, John reminds that the one who will follow him – the "Immanuel" for whom we prepare during Advent – that Holy One will baptize with "Holy Spirit and fire."<sup>xv</sup> Be clear: John's claim does not threaten the damning flames of a torturer, but reassures the cleansing forge of a refiner. While John's baptism can *inaugurate* the sacred, loving labor of holy-making, the messiah will *complete* that work, burning away everything that keeps us from right relationship with God and one another, consuming our insecurities and our fears, our offenses and our wounds, *forever*.

The final verse recapitulates this promise: "The winnowing fork is in [the messiah's] hand[. H]e will clear his threshing floor and [gather] his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Picture here that farmer's fork from Grant Wood's *American Gothic*,<sup>xvi</sup> the sort used to toss harvested wheat into the air. With this action, the heavier grain falls to the floor, and the husk – the chaff – blows aside. The winnower then sweeps the shells for disposal and gathers the grain for storage. As with the smith's crucible, "unquenchable" in this metaphor does not threaten eternal torment, but emphasizes the holy power of the cleansing fire, its loving eradication of everything keeping one from their fullest life in Christ.

Receiving this scripture in these bitterly divided days of ours, we often choose to hear it Christopher-Walken style, punctuating the text to deliver a meaning that fits our preferences and conveniences. *Preferring* for God to judge others with whom we disagree, we *conveniently* overlook our own shortcomings. If we do not ignore the lesson altogether, we externalize it, turning God's fires to dragon-breath trained on those we dislike, and repurposing that winnowing fork as an angry trident, spearing our enemies like rotten olives in a cocktail bowl [POP]. Yet, friends, be sure that this "More Cowbell"<sup>xvii</sup> reading leaves us in the company of snakes rather than the communion of saints.

While images of flames and sharp objects can feel frightening on their surface, Matthew's opening gambit does not lord over us a dispensational premillennialist John,<sup>xviii</sup> but strengthens The Baptist's message that God loves all people. John cares nothing for casting out some and welcoming others, but cares deeply that each of us would devote ourselves to right relationship with God and one another. John's sermon delivers the good news that all our aching will be healed, promising that the frailties keeping us from the fullness of joy in Immanuel will be consumed forever. Demonstrating our faithfulness – loving more and loving better moment-by-moment, day-by-day, Sunday-by-Sunday – realizes the Beloved Community of God's dream.

Returning to our bibles, hear how Isaiah affirms this generous vision. Reading from verse 1:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Praying that we may fulfill the prophecy  
with gladness and singleness of heart,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 3:2.

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<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 40:1. Through verse 2: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

<sup>iii</sup> We read Isaiah 40:1-11 on the second Sunday of Advent in Year B and at Candlelight Carols most seasons; we hear and read the Evangelists’ reference to the passage more frequently (including this Sunday, of course); and during Advent we sing its metrical setting in hymn 67, “Comfort, comfort ye my people.”

<sup>iv</sup> I could have mentioned so many others: *Annie Hall* (1977), *A View To A Kill* (1985), *True Romance* (1993), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) ...

<sup>v</sup> [From an “Inside The Actors Studio” interview with James Lipton](#) (I couldn’t find the full interview on The Googles, and I hope this referenced site isn’t suspect!). In the interview snippet, an interesting opening salvo from Walken: “Theater [began] as a religious experience. The point of it was that there would be an element that was almost, you know, an epiphany, something that would transfigure you, change you, so that when you went out, you were different than when you went in.” To which I say, “Amen.”

<sup>vi</sup> The symmetry of the images – the wilderness path and the desert highway – strongly argues in favor of the Isaiah stylistic.

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 3:3a.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 3:3b.

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 3:4.

<sup>x</sup> Matthew 3:5. “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him ...”

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 3:7.

<sup>xii</sup> Matthew 3:8.

<sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 3:10.

<sup>xiv</sup> Matthew 3:11.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> One day, I will preach “[American Gothic](#)” as a sermon illustration. Missy and I encountered the piece in 2018, during a wonderful afternoon at The Whitney. Parcel to that future sermon, Wood’s life will prove a moving story.

<sup>xvii</sup> [Lord, have mercy – so, SO funny](#). Though I can’t stand it when Jimmy Fallon breaks (which he feels permission to do in every-other-skit), the awkward fit of Ferrell’s sweater and the strange intensity he brings to the cowbell are genius.

<sup>xviii</sup> In this sermon I did not address the second half of verse 7: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” I read it as a reference to the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple, a devastation that would already have been accomplished by the time of the canonical Matthew’s distribution. Like casting John as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy increases The Baptist’s credibility, so, too, does incorporating into his voice a “prediction” like this one.