

God of Holy Waters, pour your Spirit upon us that we might hear your word and know your presence in our lives. Amen

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!
Repent! Repent!”

It is the chant of John the Baptist as he encounters people in the wilderness.

Repent! In the ongoing evolution of the Christian church, it has been accepted as common practice to consider baptism as an action of repenting for our sins – as if we are a despicable, sinful, people, in need of God’s forgiveness.

I remember sitting in worship with my then 10 year old daughter who, along with the rest of the congregation, recited the regular prayer of confession

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name.
Amen.

At the end of the prayer, my daughter, her face filled with innocence and confusion, said “but mom, I don’t do any of those things, why do I have to ask for forgiveness?”

Well, linguistic studies suggest a different understanding of the word translated as “repent”, perhaps one that my daughter might have better understood. The Greek word used in the original text is “metanoia” from the two root words “meta”, meaning “change and “noia” meaning “mind”.ⁱ

“Metanoia” – “Change your mind, change your way of thinking, change your life! Come to the waters of baptism and be renewed.”

A rather different sound for an invitation to baptism and so much more fitting for how we see Jesus' ministry unfolding.

Today's scripture story has us on the banks of the Jordan River, surrounded by wilderness. Not just any wilderness, but a biblical/theological wilderness. A wilderness reflective of the Israelite wanderings. A wilderness, not necessarily of environment, but of personal journey.

The people that John encounters in this wilderness are those who are lost, alone, wandering aimlessly through life. And to them he cries "Metanoia! Change your way of thinking, change your life! Come to the waters of baptism and be renewed."

In the Jewish tradition, a baptismal water submersion was a ritual performed on gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. But in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, John, invites everyone, no matter their traditional faith, to turn their lives around so that they might embrace a new way of being.ⁱⁱ A new community, a new kingdom, that isn't based on race, religion, creed or colour.

As a foretaste of Jesus' ministry, he too comes among the people, not to act as authority, not to baptize them, but to meet them where they are and walk the journey with them, right into the baptismal waters of the Jordan.

It's one of the gifts of baptism, one of the ripples that flows from those droplets of water. We come to realize that, when we feel like we are in the midst of our own wilderness, we are not, in fact, alone. Both Jesus and the baptized community are there with us, supporting, encouraging and comforting us along the way.

So despite John's protests, Jesus lines up with the others, enters the river with them and is baptized with them. Then, Matthew's gospel tells us,

"...suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

I don't know if you noticed it or not, but according to this gospel version, while only Jesus sees the heavens open and the Spirit descend and land on him, the voice, it seems, is heard by all.

"This is my Son ...", not "you are my son" as in the gospels of Mark and Luke but "This is my Son, pay attention folks, good things are going to come, follow his lead."

And thus, another gift of baptism, a second round of ripples that flow from those droplets of water is revealed. We, like Jesus, are named and claimed as beloved children of God. A constant reminder of who we are and whose we are.

And then, just as quickly, as the Spirit descends, it leads Jesus into the wilderness. Where better to prepare for a ministry of love and compassion than walking in the footsteps of those you are planning to come alongside?

How better to understand the challenges of living "outside the norm", wandering in the wilderness, than to actually live it, to face the challenges, experience the loneliness, feel the hunger for a sense of hope and wonder.

And not just to experience and live the challenges but to remember that even here, even in this vast wilderness, God is with us and has given us the tools we need to survive; and not just survive, but to thrive.

Yet another gift of baptism, a third round of ripples from these droplets of water: God may not save us from our trials, but God can most certainly guide us through them.

The reality is, Jesus' whole ministry is rooted in these first stories of his life. From birth to death, he walks with us, experiencing the challenges, facing the demons and eeking out any sense of hope that might be hiding in plain sight.

And the ripple effect is felt around the world as we and so many others are called to live out our baptismal vows: to be willing to have our minds changed, our way of thinking challenged, and our lives made new.

So may we dare to journey, like Jesus through the wilderness, ours and that of others. A wilderness of coming close to God and wandering away, coming close and wandering away, all the time, called to make the journey together, to help build God's beloved community; supporting, encouraging and guiding one another into a closer deeper relationship with God, reminding one another that we are beloved children of God. This is what Christ calls us to. Indeed, this is what our baptism demands of us. May it be so! Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/8/the-way-of-love-salts-lectionary-commentary-on-jesus-baptism>

ⁱⁱ Salt Project. *ibid*