

Hespeler, 8 December 2019 © Scott McAndless – 2nd Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

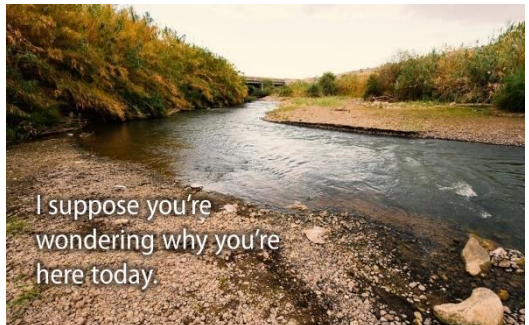
I suppose you're all wondering why you're here today. In particular, why you are in this rather desolate and lonely place on the shores of the Jordan River. I know you have come here from busy lives. Some of you came here from Jerusalem, the city that never sleeps. And many of you came from other towns and villages in Judea and even a few of you provincials came from Galilee. You all have things to do back there. It's the busy season. But you have left all of that behind and come to this desolate place. What's more, you have left behind that land, the Promised Land that God gave to you as a people and the particular plots of land that have been passed down in your families for generations.

How could you do that, abandon the land of your own ancestors? Well, isn't it obvious? The Promised Land is no longer *your* land. It's no longer the land that God gave you because it is ruled by foreigners who serve only the gods of Rome and the emperor. It is no longer Israel but Roman Judea. Therefore, you stand here on the ancient and sacred border of the Promised Land as outsiders. You are just like the children of Israel back in the days of Yeshua who came to this very spot and stood on the banks of the river and looked into the land that God had promised them, and it was not their land.

And what happened to them? You all know the story. As Yeshua stood there before the people, God went before them and the priests stepped into the water of the Jordan River carrying the sacred Ark of the Covenant and the water stopped flowing. Right there, just upstream from this this very spot, the water stood up in a heap and the bed of the river ran dry so that the people might enter into the land that God had given to them.

Maybe you didn't realize this when you left home, but you have come here today because it is time for that to happen again. Once again, God will make a path through this river for you. Once again God will give you back the land that is promised.

Now, it will be a little bit different this time. We do not have the priests with us here, for the priests have given in to the powerful of this world and they work with the forces of darkness. The priests and the temple are lost to us today. They do nothing but pacify the people so that the Romans may rule undisturbed. So the priests are not here to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the waters and so the river will not run dry. But this will not prevent us. This time you shall pass *through* the waters of the Jordan and you will



enter into the land as new people.

In a few minutes, John, God's messenger, the baptizer and the voice that cries out in this wilderness place will get around to this group. He will take you into the Promised Land. But, since you must pass through the water to do so, this is what you must do. To prepare yourself for the chilly waters of the Jordan River, you must repent. That is the only way for you to enter into the land as the force that will take it back. You cannot enter as the person you have been, you must enter as the person you will become.

Now, I hear some of you asking each other, what does that mean? How do I *repent*? I have spoken to a lot of groups like yours, and I know how you talk. I know that sometimes you seem to think that repentance is all about how you feel. Now, granted, I understand that some of you may feel bad about how you behaved in the past. You may have disappointed yourself or others. You may not have lived up to God's expectations of you. If you feel guilty about anything like that, or if anyone has made you to feel guilty for it, that is fine. God forgives and sets you free from your guilt.

But I'll tell you something, John is not particularly interested in your feelings of guilt. He's not interested in the past. He doesn't talk about wrath in the past tense, only in the future tense. We've all messed up in the past. John is interested in the now and in the future and that is what repentance is about.

Repentance is about changing your mind, changing your heart and, thus, bringing about a change in your actions. Repentance is about you, yourself, being and becoming the change that is actually needed in our land. But (and here I'm going to give you guys a bit of a warning) if any of you just happen to belong to the party of the Pharisees or the party of the Sadducees, well, John really doesn't like you guys. I mean, really. "Brood of vipers," that's what he called the last batch of Sadducees that came through here. And, I want to let you know, that it's not really personal. It's not that he doesn't like you. It's not even that he really has any problem with the teachings or the practices of those two groups. In theory at least, he knows that the Pharisees are committed to follow all of the various commandments of the law. He knows that the Sadducees have committed themselves to serving God in the temple.

His problem is not with any of that. His problem is that you have been so willing to put all of that aside and work with those who would exploit this land and its people for their own gain so that they might be secure and comfortable. So I am warning you Pharisees and Sadducees, when he sees you, he will not just ask you to repent. He will ask you to show fruit worthy of repentance. He will demand that you show him in your actions that you have changed your minds about what really matters.

That is why you have come here. That is why you have left behind everything that is familiar and comfortable to come to this desolate place,

because the time has come for us to take this country back. And I'm warning you, John will talk about this in some pretty wild terms. He will not just say that the tree of this nation is rotten and doesn't produce any fruit. He will say that, right now, the axe is about to strike the root of the tree and it will be cut down and thrown into fire. Oh, John loves talking about fire! Don't get him started.

But, I'll tell you, I've been listening to his spiel for a while now, and I have noticed something. John willingly admits that he's not the one who's going to carry all of this out. He's just here to prepare everyone, to prepare all of you to be part of it. But someone else is going to make it happen.

So, I thought a lot about that and I think I've figured it out. We needed a Yeshua to take this nation the first time. To use the old Hebrew language, we needed a Joshua. That's why I believe that John is here to prepare the way for a new Yeshua – a new Joshua, or maybe for you Greek speakers in the crowd, a new Jesus. It's all the same name. But actually what his name is and where he comes from doesn't matter, this is about what he's going to do. And what he's going to do is take the nation back for God.

Now, it's pretty clear what John thinks that's going to look like. It's going to be like the first time, with fire and destruction and death. I get where he's coming from, but I'm beginning to think that he's not quite right about that. This new Yeshua is going to be different, I think. I actually don't think that it really worked the first time, taking this nation by violence. The new Yeshua, I think, will not take the country by violence, but rather by love, peace and hope. But whatever it is, just understand that John is just preparing the way for what God is about to do and you are here in order to prepare to be part of it. So, into the water you go!

I suppose you're all wondering why you're here today. In particular, why you are in this rather desolate and lonely place that it sometimes seems the world has forgotten. I know you have come here from busy lives. Many of you have demanding jobs and schedules. I know some of you are retired, but sometimes I look at your lives and think you might be even busier than those who work. Nevertheless, you have set all of that aside to come apart to this place at this time. Why are you here?

You are here, quite simply, because it's time to take this nation back. And you may think that I'm talking about taking the nation back from the forces of secularization, but actually I'm not. Yes, it is true that this nation is less explicitly Christian today than it has been in the past and of course that does present certain challenges to Christians living in it.

But that is actually the kind of thing that the Pharisees and Sadducees were working on. Remember them, that brood of vipers? Their problem was that they were so obsessed with the place of their religion in the culture that they missed a much more insidious danger. They allied themselves with

powerful political force, not challenging the evil that it did, in order to advance their tamed version of the faith, a version that would not disturb the powers-that-be and that allowed the mad emperor to do whatever he pleased without check or balance.

No, this conquest is different. It is about confronting the truly evil forces at work in our world – the forces of greed, of power for the sake of power, of hatred and tribalism. And, for that reason, the Yeshua that we follow will not lead us in a conquest of violence and hate but of love and hope.

You are here because you have been called here to be a part of the nation that should be. You stand on the borders of that new nation, on the banks of the river, to prepare to enter. And just like those pilgrims who came to the river in the days of the Baptist, you shall enter by passing through the water. Indeed, most of you have already passed through.

So there is one thing that remains for you. You must repent. And though I know that all of us carry around regrets for our failures and shortcomings in the past, repentance does not mean merely how you feel bad about those things. And, though I promise you that God does forgive and doesn't seek to hold against you what has gone wrong in the past, repentance is not merely about seeking forgiveness for the past. All of that is merely the prelude to repentance.

True repentance is about how you choose to be today and tomorrow and in the weeks and months to come. It's about how you change your mind and your heart and ultimately your actions so that you begin to live according to the change you want to see in the world. That is what it meant when you were taken and dragged through the waters of the river from one side to the other. That's what it meant when you were baptized and that is what it will mean when you are baptized.

That is it. That is what you have come here for. I know that there are some who would add other things on top of that. They would tell you that there are certain things you have to believe, certain ideas that you have to sign on to. I have no problem with any of that. But the fact of the matter is that we are never all going to agree about all of those things. Where we must agree is here on the banks of this river. We are here because the new Yeshua has come and we are part of the army that will take back this land to a place of peace, hope and joy that will be for all.