

# **“A New Way”**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

**The second in the Advent Series  
“Walking Together in the Light of God”**

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson  
Interim Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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## “A New Way”

Matthew 3:1-12

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O Holy One, You come to us in ways that are familiar and comforting at this time of year – and You also come to us in ways that are discomfoting, too – and so we pray that you would keep us open and receptive as You speak to us through Your Word for us this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your Holy Name.

In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

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I want to begin this morning by asking all of you some questions ... Now, this is NOT a quiz! Rather, it’s just a way to begin to engage this challenging story from Matthew this morning! So, here’s my first question ...

When you’re setting out on an unfamiliar journey – traveling to a new destination, **HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR WAY?**

How many of you use a traditional map – in paper form? Or maybe an atlas? (*I still love those old maps ... made out of paper – but they’re hard to come by these days!*)

How many of you use a real-time, web navigation device like Google Maps or Bing Maps? (*My kids finally trained me to use Google Maps a few years back!*)

Or how many of you – perhaps – have a **co-pilot** – or maybe a ‘backseat driver’ – who is always willing to help navigate the way?

And, how many of you just have a *really good sense of direction* – and **rarely** need any assistance in **FINDING YOUR WAY?**

**FINDING OUR WAY ...** This *certainly* has been a common theme in our lives in recent times, hasn't it?

I mean, all of us – **every single one of us** – all around the planet — have been **FINDING OUR WAY** – through these pandemic times during these past two years and nine months. And, just recently, I learned some new language to describe these times – “TRIPLE-DEMIC.” In other words, we need to continue to be careful and cautious about the spread of COVID as well as RSV and influenza.

**And so, we are, indeed, STILL finding our way through these times – together!**

And, here, in these transitional times, at First Church, we are *certainly* **FINDING OUR WAY** – together -- through *all* the challenges and losses *and* opportunities that come with these times -- while *also* tending to the wide range of feelings that we are all experiencing in response to these *in-between times*.

**We ARE finding our way.**

And, at this time of year, many among us are also **FINDING OUR WAY** through the crowds at the malls as we do our Christmas

shopping ... or perhaps **FINDING OUR WAY** through the stress of online shopping!

And, as of this past Friday night, thanks to the University of Utah, our Buckeyes may have **FOUND THEIR WAY** into the College Football Playoff! Go Bucks!

So – here we all are – **SEEKING OUR WAY** and **FINDING OUR WAY** through the ups and downs of our lives – and within our life together – and in this busy, and often stressful, time of year.

Now, wouldn't it be comforting and reassuring, if, on this second Sunday of Advent, we were to be met with words of Scripture that acknowledge our *perseverance* and *resolve* in the midst of the stress and struggles of our lives?

But, **no**, instead, in our Gospel reading from Matthew today, God confronts us and challenges us – and maybe even *dis-comforts* us – through God's word for us this day which is a call for **REPENTANCE!**

And, as is often the case, God comes to us in unexpected ways and often through the voice of those who are deemed “**the other.**” And so, in our text this morning, God *grabs the attention* of the people who had gathered, there, in the *wilderness* of Judea, through the compelling preaching of John the Baptist, this one who was a *wanderer*.

He was an *outcast* – this one who – according to both Matthew and Mark – wore clothes made of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey! John the Baptist was *eccentric* and **very** different from that crowd of people in just about every way.

He didn't fit in. He was definitely an outsider, and yet, God still chose John the Baptist to go to the people – and meet the people *exactly* where they were – and as they were in order to wake them up – and to challenge them – and to prepare them for **The Way** – that is, for a **NEW WAY!**

Now, the word **ADVENT**, as you may know, is derived from the Latin word **ADVENTUS**, or the Biblical Greek word **PAROUSIA**, both of which literally mean “*a coming or a new beginning.*”

And so, here, in this story, John the Baptist represents a bridge, if you will, between **WHAT HAS BEEN** and **WHAT IS YET TO BE**. He has one foot in the old age which is coming to a close – and his other foot is in a time that is just being born. And so, in this story, John the Baptist – this prophet -- represents a **bridge** between the eras of Israel's history.

And the Gospel writer of Matthew makes that clear for us by quoting the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah who wrote:

*The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness:  
prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.*

So, here we are – in this in-between time – this liminal space, if you will – with John the Baptist, representing **what has been** while he also points toward **what is yet to be**.

And again, the setting of this story is the wilderness. And that is significant because the Biblical Greek word for wilderness is “*eremia*” which is translated as a **place of renewal and revelation**.

Now, I don't know about you, but I do find that to be very reassuring ... that these wilderness places of our lives – and these transitional

times along our journeys – can be seen and experienced as a time of renewal and revelation and insight – a time to re-set and reorient ourselves to a **NEW WAY of being** ... if we are open to it!

And how do we do that?

Well, John the Baptist certainly does **NOT** mince words, and according to Matthew 3:2, John appears in the wilderness while proclaiming, “**Repent** for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

And then, again, in verse 8, this time, addressing the Pharisees and the Sadducees who had been coming for baptism, John the Baptist warned them when he said, “Bear fruit worthy of **repentance!**”

He, then, went on to tell the crowd (v. 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.*”

**Repentance ...**

It’s a loaded word, isn’t it? It’s a concept that I think many of us probably associate with “fire and brimstone” preaching – that type of preaching that relies on the depiction of eternal damnation as a persuasion to follow God’s will ... that type of preaching that we **DON’T** often hear within the United Church of Christ. **Thank goodness!**

However, the word, **repentance**, is derived from the Biblical Greek word, METANOIA, which literally means: *to change one’s mind – or to turn around – or to reorient oneself*. It describes a **spiritual** re-orientation.

And I find that to be especially helpful in this season of Advent – during *this* time – when we are called to *prepare the way of the Lord*.

In all the busyness – and the stress – and the “overscheduledness” of these weeks leading up to Christmas, we can always count on John the Baptist – this truth-teller who doesn’t mince words – to remind us and confront us and implore us – to *look within* and *to examine our hearts* and to *prepare our whole selves* for the birth of the Christ child – within our hearts – and in our lives – once again!

I’d like to close this morning with a brief prayer written by Joyce Rupp who is an author, spiritual director, and co-director of the Institute of Compassionate Presence.

### **“Advent Prayer”**

*O Holy One,  
awaken our hearts,  
quiet our minds,  
open the door of our beings to perceive Your presence.  
Settle what stirs endlessly within us.  
Quiet the voice of haste and hurry.  
Awaken our inner senses to recognize Your love hiding beneath the frenzy.  
Enfold us in Your attentiveness.  
Wrap a mantle of mindfulness around every part of our days.  
We want to welcome You with joy and focus on your dwelling place within.*

Amen!

