2nd Sunday of Advent

John the Baptist bursts onto the scene today. Matthew introduces him with this gospel passage. Luke introduces John as a fetus in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. Matthew brings John onto the stage as an assertive adult. Other gospels tell us about John's preaching, but Matthew quotes John. You can hear the content, style, directness, and urgency of his message: "Repent," John says, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" We're in chapter 3. In chapter 4, Jesus begins to preach using exactly the same words: "Repent," Jesus says, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" John wears the same outfit Elijah the prophet wore, and he eats local—just what the earth provides in his neighborhood wilderness: locusts from the sky and honey from the bee.

You can visualize what a dramatic figure John must have cut. In my imagination, he was a striking man with a distinctive voice. Today marketers work with celebrities because people pay attention to someone physically appealing, no matter what they're saying. If you were to look at John's message on paper, "Repent," you'd wonder why people felt drawn to this. John had to be a compelling person to see and hear.

We get a glimpse of his power as he handles the Pharisees and Sadducees. They only approach him after many others have stood in line. Matthew says, "Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to [John] and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins." The religious leaders took note of John's widespread impact.

When they showed up in the line of sinners, John could have said, "Welcome" to acknowledge in humility the tremendous example they were giving, or even, "Who am I to judge?" But no, John took another approach. He glared at them and shouted, "You brood of vipers!" John saw something more. He saw they were checking on him to evaluate the religious competition. John presumes they have no interest in repentance. He asks sarcastically, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Then, to put their hypocrisy on public display, John says, like a person from the Show Me State, "Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance." They can't. All they can say is Abraham was their father, and that ancestry is enough to show their importance. John considers their pedigree less important than their deeds. He argues, "God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones." John is probably getting through to them at this point, so he figures it's time to uncork his big prophecy: "the one coming after me is mightier than I… He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." That's how John the Baptist introduces Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

My brothers and sisters, as we rove Advent this year, let's place ourselves inside this gospel, let's honestly ask, "Which line are we in?" Are we in the line of those repenting of their sins and seeking the baptism of forgiveness? Or are we among the Pharisees and Sadducees, in line to observe what is going on, but not looking at our own hypocrisy, our own misdeeds, our own false motivations? In our hearts, how do we respond when John the Baptist cries out, "Repent"?