

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We live in a world of endless voices. We are directed by the voice of our supervisor. We hear politicians speak very different things. The media, researchers, doctors, therapists, and advertisers urge us to listen to their voice. Some of the voices we hear grate. Others are shrill. Yet, today, there is one voice that rings out in the wilderness.

Not only do we *hear* John in the wilderness, but we too are in a collective wilderness. In both Matthew and this Advent season, we are in a time of transition. In Advent, we find that the celebration of the incarnation is not yet fully manifest. The church is not yet fully decorated. We gather in between Thanksgiving and Christmas to analyze our late-pandemic lives, sit amid our dissatisfaction, and yearn for a better world. Here, we are in the wilderness.

In the biblical wilderness, John the Baptist exposed the dirty truth about the religious leaders of the time. You see, far too often the religious leaders relied on being descendants of Abraham as their free pass to do and say whatever they wanted regardless of how it impacted others. Their demeanor was not something unique to that time—we experience it as well. It is the privilege comes with a certain skin color, social status, nationality, lineage, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It's when we presume that our privilege will carry us, or that our privilege will help us to get out of trouble, or that our privilege will at least preserve what we've become accustomed to experiencing. Each one of us sitting here has

privilege that works in our favor—whether it’s being white, straight, male, employed, American-born, English-speaking, able-bodied, cis-gendered, or simply living in the United States. We all have privilege that others across the world are not granted – privileges like access to a religious community within our tradition, or the privilege of having someone who can speak our language generally around, or the privilege of accessing water with relative ease. It’s so easy to let our fear of losing this privilege or the over-reliance on that privilege to lead us down a destructive path—a path that ignores the other, a path that dominates the other, a path that destroys others.

That is where John the Baptist’s sermon speaks truth to our condition. You see, John preaches a short sermon that calls us to repent because the kingdom of heaven is coming near. Now, most of us think that repentance means saying you’re sorry - that you’re really, really sorry and will never ever do “it” again. That’s a part of repentance, certainly, but to repent is more than that. You see, as theologian David Lose reminds us, repentance means taking another direction or choosing another course. This action calls into question our present behavior. The emphasis is less on what is wrong with what we’re doing now; it’s more about what is helpful for us to do differently. Repentance is not about shame and judgment; rather, it is about awareness. Awareness that what we say and do is not aligned with God’s voice of peace and equity for all people and for all creation. And throughout this next year, we will be exploring the gospel of Matthew together. We’ll hear the voice of Jesus direct us towards God’s way of justice. Jesus will reveal that God’s way, or the kingdom of heaven, is a reversal of what we’ve come to know. We’ll come to understand that there is honor in serving, that forgiveness is far superior to

revenge, and that the greatest wealth comes from giving our stockpiles of earthly treasures away. Jesus will use parable, story, and action to give us a new way of seeing the world. His voice will remind us of familiar stories with a new spin, and Jesus will act a lot like Moses. Jesus will remind us of how Moses rescued the Israelites from slavery, and he'll reveal how we are rescued from selfishness and evil. Jesus will retell Isaiah's story of a suffering servant that will bring life to many and he will embody that essence. Jesus will climb onto a mountain, much like Moses, and reveal a new way of being, doing, and seeing God's work among us. All of that will come in Matthew so that we might turn from the ways that we've become accustomed, to turn from the privilege that we've allow to dominate our lives, and to turn from the self-centered tendencies so that, once and for all, we might hear God's voice and embody repentance, that we might change our lives and the lives of others for the better.

In just a few moments, Rowen, Vaugh, Cora, and Miles will all take their first communion. This is the next step in their baptismal journey. With this meal, they, and all of us, are changed with everyday bread and wine. We come to this table to experience God's vision for our world. A world where those with earthly privilege and power get the same bread and wine as those who have none. A world where serving becomes the greatest gift. A world filled with constant reminders that God promises to be with us, to love us, and to sustain us will never end.

Friends, that is the gift of today's reading. We are given the reminder that God has come among us, that God is with us in this community, and that God's promise is made known every time we eat this bread and drink this cup. May we heed the

voice of John the Baptist calling us to prepare for what is coming. May we turn towards God's way of life. But most importantly, may we remember that we have a God who is always with us and loves us beyond all measure. Amen.