

**TRANSFORMING FIRE**  
**MATTHEW 3:1-12**  
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Every year he comes across the biblical stage, John the Baptist – a figure who stands between the Old Testament and New – somewhere after the law of Mt. Sinai but before the love of Calvary.

To use an old metaphor for change, John is like a frog dropped into a pot of boiling water. The religious authorities he speaks to are like frogs who've been sitting in the pot while the water has been getting hotter and hotter.

John enters society to shake things up, calling for immediate change. The religious authorities meanwhile say, 'this may not be an ideal world but surely we need not turn everything upside down just yet.'

Where do you find yourself this morning? With John or with the religious authorities? I recently heard the story of a poor west African nation. So poor it was considered one of the poorest on the planet until about three years ago when they discovered oil.

Now the leader of the country and his family have bank accounts totaling nearly a billion dollars. The last deposit to those accounts made this fall – in excess of eleven million dollars – was literally wheeled to the banks in suitcases of cash. The rest of the nation, however, languishes in poverty. Most are unemployed. The average wage is less than a dollar a day. Members of the political opposition frequently disappear, end up in prisons, die from torture.

Just when I found myself festering over that distant empire, where corruption goes unchecked, the story ended with a reporter describing the private jet that makes weekly trips to and from Houston, TX home of the companies that pay the cash to gain the access to the oil in that country.

Whether we are talking about a tiny African nation or the mightiest nation on earth – every age and people are in need of transformation. Advent is the season when we step back, take stock, open ourselves to the process of transformation. A process that begins with repentance and ends with fire according to the Baptist.

The word Matthew uses from which we get the word 'repentance' is metanoia. Repentance is not the wrong translation exactly. Metanoia does mean 'change your behavior' but it means 'change your behavior because you have let your heart be changed.' Base your life not on the flawed and over-rated systems that are squashing the life out of you, but rather, let your relationships, business, recreation, work, politics and theology be driven by what your heart has seen.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus his heart told him Jesus was the one all creation had been waiting for.

There are decisive turning points in life. Metanoia moments you might call them. Seeing-with-the-heart-moments. It is why so many people flocked to John when he was baptizing in the Jordan River. They had trusted the flawed and over-rated systems that were still squashing the life out of them and they wanted to turn things around.

They found reassurance in John's invitation to a world and a way of life that held them accountable for their conduct. They found reassurance that morality is not reduced to a single command – 'thou shalt not get caught.'

The alternative – that we and the terrorists and dictators and corporate crooks might be answerable to no one – is the reason for the palpable sense these days that the world is teetering on a dangerous precipice. But John points to a God who cares about each and every one and demands accountability. To discover such a God and to discover who we really are, painful as that may be, brings relief.

Matthew states that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to hear John and be baptized as well. What were they doing among the crowd? Were they serious seekers? John says to them, 'you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' We get the impression that these members of the establishment might have been toying with changing their ways but not serious about transforming their lives. They wanted to assuage their guilt and feel better but not die to their old selves.

When you find yourself in a metanoia moment there is no watering down transformation. Just Friday standing in the deli reading the caption of a picture on the front page of the *New York Times* of six young Iraqi policemen who had been killed by insurgents, the proprietor of the store called my attention to the front page of the *Buffalo News*.

It was the picture of the Orchard Park father whose son was killed recently when a rocket hit his humvee in Iraq. The father was huddled over the flag-draped coffin of his twenty-two year old son. The man was paralyzed in grief.

'A sad day for Western New York,' said the deli owner. 'A sad day indeed,' I agreed.

Sometimes life jolts us out of business-as-usual living. The overwhelming sense I had standing there in the deli holding those newspapers was that the world needs to change – not incrementally but rapidly, immediately, now – which is what John the Baptist was trying to say. Such moments are powerful reminders that life is a mysterious, fragile, precious gift. Such moments are reminders, because we need reminding, to treat each other with kindness, respect, generosity, and justice.

None of us can change the world instantly. But any of us can allow the Holy Spirit of God to flood our hearts and lead us into new and transformed life.

Maybe you've had a metanoia moment too: a loved one falling ill; a dream shattered; a relationship broken. The challenge is to let such moments transform our living – to let them shape in us the beauty, joy, goodness, and generosity of life that our hearts have seen in Jesus. Otherwise the world will lull us into cynicism or complacency.

Some days that is a tall order. Some days it is a piece of cake. Some days we do it well. Some days we don't. But my hunch is that every one of us here today knows that on one occasion or another our hearts have seen something, seen Jesus in fact, and that we, therefore, must choose how we shall live because of what we have seen.

Transformation ends, said John, in fire, a holy fire, a fire of passion for justice and truth and peace. Amen.