

As we read the stories in the Bible, it seems like God's people are often times finding themselves in a wilderness of some type. For forty years they trudged through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan. Here in our text, we see them coming out to the wilderness where John is preaching and baptizing.

When you think of a wilderness, what comes to mind? Dry, hot, snakes and scorpions perhaps? It's not a place we would choose to live. We will journey through a wilderness, but who would want to make their home there?

And yet John does. The prophet Isaiah, in fact, calls him, "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness.*" He is a strange sight. He wears camel's hair for clothing. He eats locusts and wild honey. His breath must be atrocious. He resembles a demon possessed man. But it is God's Spirit within him, not an evil spirit.

He is in the wilderness because that is where God puts him. A wilderness is a place of danger. A place of temptation and testing. You'd best be careful out there or you may not find your way out. Many of God's people perished in the wilderness in the Old Testament. They entered it and did not come out. And it's because they were unwilling to repent of their sins. And so, God sends John into the wilderness, and he calls the people to repent. And not just the people in our text, but also you and me.

We hear that word a lot, don't we? The call to repent. Maybe it goes in one ear and out the other. Are we even serious about repentance? We know people who need to repent, and they're not us. We're not half bad. Oh, we could always be better. Who couldn't improve in some way? But compared to most others out there, we're way above average.

Is this how you think? Then you are more lost than you realize. Repentance does not have to do with how many, and how awful are our sins. It has to do with our attitude toward our sinful heart. Not thinking that we need to repent falls into the area of unbelief. "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" John tore into the Pharisees and Sadducees in our text for their lack of repentance. He called them a *brood of vipers*. What makes a viper is the poison within it. And any of us who do not see a need for daily repentance are filled with poison. The poison of the evil one. We are in the wilderness with the brood of vipers, and we will never get out. Unless we change our attitude toward our sinful hearts.

It's not that John is telling us to improve ourselves. He is not even telling us to clean up our filthy hearts. Repentance is not about what we do, but about what God does within us. When John cries, "*Repent!*" he is telling us to admit defeat. We cannot clean ourselves up. We cannot find our way out of the wilderness. We have a crisis on our hands that we cannot fix, but only God can. We are to do what the people are doing in our text. They are coming out to John, it says, "*Confessing their sins.*"

John did not preach about himself, nor did he baptize into himself. He preached about Jesus. And he baptized for the forgiveness of sins that is in Jesus. The people came out to John in the wilderness, but it was not John who could lead them out of the wilderness. It was Jesus.

And that is still how it is today. Jesus is able to lead you out of the wilderness of your sin because He entered into that very wilderness for you. Isaiah wrote of John that he is the *voice crying out in the wilderness*. "*Repent!*" he cries. But listen. Open your ears and listen. There is another voice that we hear. Another voice crying out in the wilderness. Do you hear that voice? "*My God, My God,*" it cries, "*Why have You forsaken Me!*" It is the voice of Jesus crying out from the wilderness of the cross.

Jesus cries out from the cross because He is bearing the sin of the world. He is bearing your sin and mine. Never was there a wilderness like this one. Jesus bore our sin alone. Even His Father rejected Him. And so, my friend, He will never reject you. God will not reject you for your sinful heart because all your sins are laid upon Jesus. They are not your sins anymore. They belong to Jesus.

When the people came out to John confessing their sins, they were baptized by him. Baptism is God's answer to sin. It is the power of God. Baptism is how God cleanses your sinful heart. It marks you as one for whom Jesus died and rose again. And it means that you will never perish out in the wilderness because your sins, all of them, are forgiven.

John cries, *Repent!* But Jesus cries, "Forgiven! You are forgiven. For you, He cries, My blood was shed on the cross.

John cries out in the wilderness, but Jesus leads you out of the wilderness of your sin. He leads you always to Himself. To your baptism into His death and resurrection. To His Holy Supper for your assurance. To His holy wounds which speak to you the word of pardon and grace.

There is no wilderness when you are with Jesus. And you are. Better said, He is with you, and He is for you. His blood, His grace, His forgiveness, it is all for you. Amen.