The season of Advent is upon us once again as we hear the story of the birth of the Christ child told by the greatest of New Testament writers, Luke, whose words plant us firmly in a time, and a place. That place is the River Jordan with John the Baptist “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And then as John the Baptist steps into the river, quoting Isaiah, and suddenly … Handel’s Messiah breaks out:

_SUNG:_ “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight...”

Now you know why the Gospel of Luke is sometimes called “the singing gospel.” This scene in the gospel today is like the Wizard Oz, when the film suddenly turns from black-and-white into Technicolor. John the Baptist, this holy man who eats locusts and calls people vipers, is definitely one of the more Technicolor characters in the Bible. But before we dismiss him as deranged, I’d like us to pause on this Second Sunday of Advent so that we might be re-introduced to this very holy man, John the Baptist. There is something captivating about him – he is mentioned prominently in all four gospels. He threatens the earthly powers of greed, violence and evil, and so he isolates himself in the desert, living in the barest of ways. John the Baptist carries within him the words of the prophets of Israel. Like most of the prophets, he will meet a sudden and brutal death. Yet, there is also something about John the Baptist that is so charismatic that, as the gospels tell us, people from Jerusalem and “the whole Judean countryside,” come looking for him. What is it they are looking for? What is it that brings them to the River Jordan to find John the Baptist and immerse themselves in the waters with him? These crowds have traveled a long, hard road, seeking something beyond themselves. Maybe they aren’t quite sure what.
They come from many places, many backgrounds, but they are united by a single question: Are you the messiah, the One who will set us free from all that harms and oppresses us?

John doesn’t answer their question directly. Instead, he quotes the prophet Isaiah, describing the road they’ve already traveled – this crooked, rocky road, full of potholes, boulders, valleys and mountains.

We, too, know this road, for we, too, have traveled this road. Of course, John is speaking not just of roads. He is speaking of life.

“How do we travel this road?” the crowds ask. “Where do we go next?”

John gives them a one-word answer: “repent.”

The word “repent” means: “turn around,” and that is the great and wonderful irony of this story.

Turn around.

John the Baptist tells these people, who have come so far, that what they seek has been with them all along. Turn around. Go home. What you seek is already with you.

God has been with you every step of the way on this crooked twisty road of life. even when you haven’t noticed. Turn around, open yourself, and you will know God is not so distant.

God is not hovering far above us in the clouds. God is right here in front of us, embracing us in infinite love and in infinite ways. God is deep within us.

Turn around, get rid of whatever is blocking your path from knowing this.

Repent of what gets in your way. What is it in your life blocking you? What are the boulders? Push them away.

Turn around. Repent.

And then open yourself to experiencing God within you and around you.

The miracle in this ancient story at the river is this: the people get it. Before going home, John the Baptist does one more thing: He washes them – baptizes them – in the river as a symbol that their life is new again from that moment on, and that it is never too late to turn around and experience the holy all around us. Our life is new again today.

John the Baptist gives the people one more gift:

He tells them about the Messiah to come – the One who has already come – Jesus the Anointed One of God, who will heal of us of our brokenness, and break the very shackles of whatever hells entangle us.
This great story will continue to unfold for us through our Advent season and into Christmas, and will unfold for us into the new year, and beyond for the rest of our lives.

Hear this story new again, dwell in it, experience it. This story is ours, and it is the greatest of Christmas gifts we will ever receive.

Be awake, watch for God around you and experience the spark of the Holy at work in your life. Be ready for the amazing grace that will transform each of us.

John steps into the river with us, and shows us how to see, how to hear, how to be ready with all of our being.

He tells us to out of break out of whatever causes us to harm ourselves and harm others.

Turn around. Repent.

How?

Let’s begin by practicing forgiveness and patience, especially with those closest to us. We are imperfect. We make mistakes. Let’s be slow to anger and quick forgive each other.

In the days ahead, look and listen for God all around us. What we seek is already with us.

We really don’t have to travel far to find what we seek. Watch for the dawn of Christ’s light every day of your amazing, grace filled life.

And when we do, be ready for what will happen next: