

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 3:1-12

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The story this week is the story of John the Baptist and his preaching. It follows the birth narrative in Matthew but it is part of the overall sequence of thinking about the coming of Jesus. It is waiting and preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

This is a public story and the tone is of public utterance. John's preaching is the dominant element in this story, comprising the last five episodes. The story also opens with John's words. Therefore, the most important element in telling this story is the development of the character of John the Baptist and of discovering his voice and his spirit.

The structure of the episodes can be identified in relation to topics. The first episode is the introduction to John's preaching and the prophesy of Isaiah that is the fulfillment that is the background of that preaching. The marks of John's authenticity as a prophet are the coat of camel's hair, the leather belt, and what he eats. John's diet of locusts and wild honey is not weird, it is a the sign of his being a prophet. These are characteristics that Elijah had. Hence, this is a verbal thread bringing back the memory of Elijah.

The speech is a the warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming. The whole speech is addressed to them. As a result, when you tell the story you will be addressing your audience as if you were John the Baptist and they were Sadducees and Pharisees coming for baptism. So think of your listeners as being sympathetic characters, wanting baptism. Hear the very strong words from John to the audience then as Pharisees and Sadducees. Don't think of the Pharisees and Sadducees of being someone else who we are talking about. It is rather addressed to us, that is to our congregation, to your listeners as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The five thematic elements in John's speech are each a separate move in his address to us as the Pharisees and Sadducees. These episodes—fleeing from the wrath to come, bearing fruit worthy of repentance, the axe being laid at root of the trees, the significance of baptism, and the sorting of the wheat and the chaff—are spoken in a tone of warning. Think about it.

Verbal Threads:

1. "Repent" – Repent is at the beginning. It is the first word of John the Baptist's speech. It is the last word of the warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees. And it is the first line of the baptism episode, "I baptize you with water for repentance." Repentance is about the spirit of examination and of turning your head around, orienting your mind and spirit toward the kingdom that is coming.
2. Theme and words around baptism