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John the Baptist
was a zealous Wildman
who cried out
his convictions
in the wilderness.

He had the advantage
of belief that carried
his crazy message
of turning toward God
straight into hearts
that might have
turned away
without his vehement faith.

Transformation
is possible and powerful.
Just Ask John the Baptist.

We mostly think of him
crying out in the wilderness
railing against sinners
but in fact he was shouting
out his belief
that with God
we can be transformed.

You see, we often think
that John was calling us
to Repent,
to feel bad about our sins

and seek forgiveness.

But the word Repent
is the word for
a change in direction,
or redirection.

John is saying we must
change the direction
we are going
and follow God
in all our actions,
all our lives
by steering the course
of our lives
by his will all our days.

This is so much harder
than a one time
act of penance.

Marcus Borg says
that “apology and repentance,
forgiveness and repentance,
are quite different.
Apology and forgiveness
do not in themselves
imply change.
Repentance does .”

We might say that
repentance then,
is not a diet,
it's a lifestyle.

Much the way
steering a car
requires constant adjustment
of the steering wheel,
following Christ
requires constant checking
of our current position
and adjusting
to stay on the right course.

Borg says that the
biblical meaning
of "repentance"
is quite different
from an apology.
"In the Jewish Bible,
the Christian Old Testament,
"repentance" means
"to return" –
that is, to return
from exile,
to return to life
in the presence of God,
to a life centered in God."

And so, the benefits
of this redirect
are the transforming power
of God to make our lives
meaningful, holy
, kingdom worthy lives
lived in the presence,
of God.

God does not

transform us once
and we are done.
We must continually
be repentant,
which means we must
continually and consciously
turn toward God,
readying our hearts
and lives for
Christ's indwelling.

Brian Stoffregen says that
"It isn't like a door
we pass through once
that gets us into the kingdom.
Repentance is the
ongoing lifestyle
of the people
in the kingdom.

Repent is in the present tense
which denotes
doing it over and over again."

This is the picture of
Repentance that John
was trying to paint
with river water
in the wilderness.

We must constantly
be alert to our actions,
our decisions and priorities
to keep them in line
with God's desire for us

to live full and healthy
kingdom lives.

The kingdom of heaven"
is uniquely Matthew's phrase.
He often uses it
in place of Mark's
"kingdom of God."

If we are to hear the Gospel –
literally the good news of Christ,
we must begin
with the Baptizer
because our hearts
and minds must first
be prepared, ready,
waiting for the news
with lives dedicated
to really following him.

The surprising thing is
that our own response
to the good news of Christ
is not to “accept him”
but to be ready for him.

Stoffregen says our response
to the coming of heaven's rule
is “not worship or praise,
but repentance.

“Perhaps this is the big problem,”
He says, “with the coming
of the Kingdom
or the coming of Jesus

at Christmas or Palm Sunday –
we want to celebrate and praise,
rather than repent –
to let the coming one
change our lives.

John got it right.
He was not out in the desert
singing praise songs
to the faithful.

He was shouting out
what he had been
born to shout.

That the kingdom of God
was at hand
and that every person there
had the opportunity
to get their lives
and souls in order
to really and truly
live lives following God.

And the proof of that readiness
is in changing our ways,
turning away
from our sins,
our own desires
and plans
and directing ourselves
in God.

That is why
we don't begin

the joy of Christmas
until we have spent time
in Advent preparing
the way for Christ
to march into our lives.

We suffer through
the admonitions
and wooliness of John
before we get to
the excitement
of the Christmas birth.

John is required reading
for Christians because
he was the voice
that prepared the world
for Christ's coming.

It was the power
and force of John's personality,
his imbedded certainty
that he was the precursor,
the one destined
to prepare the way
for the coming of the Lord
that led farmers
and fishermen,
soldiers and Pharisees
to be baptized
and chastised
on the banks of the river.

It is the power of the one
He prepares us for

That will transform us

Listen -- his voice calls us now
Telling us to turn again
To the lord,
To turn again to readiness
For Christ's coming.
Amen.