Sermon-based Small Groups

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1stPresDowntown

Preparing for the Kingdom

Matthew 3:1-12

Week of October 11, 2026

This week's scripture:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear fruit worthy of repentance is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

1. The Announcement
John's message—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"—is presented in the sermon as good news, not a threat. How do you instinctively receive that kind of announcement? What makes it feel like good news to you, and what makes it feel unsettling?

John appears in the wilderness, not the temple. The sermon noted that Matthew keeps placing the action at the margins—the Magi from the East, the family in exile, now John in the desert. What does it say about God that the Kingdom announcement keeps coming from unexpected places and unexpected people?

2. Open Hands
The crowds come to John with a posture of openness—confessing sins, receiving baptism, standing in the river. The sermon describes this as "coming with nothing to offer except need." What does that kind of coming look like in your own prayer life or relationship with God?

The illustration in the sermon was of approaching a king with open, upturned palms—a gesture meaning both "I am not armed" and "I am ready to receive." Where in your life right now are you being invited to put down your weapons and come with open hands?

3. Closed Fists
The Pharisees and Sadducees arrive at the river, but John sees immediately that they are not coming in surrender—they are coming to manage the threat. What does "religious self-protection" look like in your own experience? Have you ever participated in faith more as insurance than as genuine surrender?

The sermon shared the story of Karl Barth—one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century—who, when asked near the end of his life what he believed with the most certainty, said: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." What does it mean to you that after a lifetime of serious faith, the most honest answer turns out to be the simplest one?

4. The Challenge to Pedigree
John names the specific form the closed fist takes: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" The sermon asked: what is our equivalent of that? Church membership? Moral track record? Family faith heritage? What is the thing you are most tempted to present to God as a credential—and what would it look like to lay it down?

The sermon described God as "not dependent on existing structures, lineages, or institutions to accomplish his purposes"—able to raise up children to Abraham from stones. How does that claim both challenge and free you? Where do you need to loosen your grip on the structures you trust?

5. The One Who Is Coming

John says he is not worthy to carry the sandals of the One who is coming. The sermon describes John's posture as "profound humility." How does genuine humility—like John's—differ from self-deprecation or low self-worth? What does it look like to hold your gifts and your need at the same time?