

December 7, Advent 2A (Matthew 3:1-12)

Even if repentance begins right now, it feels too late for anything to change.

by [Liddy Barlow](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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You open Sunday's door on the Advent calendar and peek inside, expecting to find a chocolate or at least an illustration of some holly. You discover, instead, a winnowing fork and an unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist bursts into this season as a startling, chastening presence. His strange clothes and ascetic diet mark him as a prophet, a type not seen in Israel in generations. Like the prophets before him, John sees what the culture around him cannot. He can tell time. He knows what hour this is and how the people should respond. The kingdom of God is at hand, and its advent demands action.

Compelled by John's preaching, people from across the country travel to the Jordan to hear him for themselves. His movement is one of mass repentance: he urges the crowds to examine their lives in the light of the coming kingdom and to commit to change accordingly. Recognizing the power of symbol and ritual, John combines their hope for inner cleansing with a sign of outward washing. Drawing on the tradition of ritual bathing—from the immersive waters of the monthly mikvah to priestly handwashing at the temple—he offers a new rite for those who hear his preaching: baptism.

John also understands that this symbol alone is insufficient. He urges his hearers to bear fruit worthy of repentance. What's the use in regretting our past if we don't act on our declaration and start living as if we are changed people?

John's call to repentance is still compelling today. Our New Year's resolutions, our fitness goals, and our self-improvement books are signs of optimism but also indicators of regret: they demonstrate our acknowledgment that we are not yet all we hope to become. We know we need to change our lives. Like the Judeans, we yearn for a fresh start, a simple way to reset the scoreboard and begin again.

Too often, though, a truly new beginning seems impossible. Our stories have already taken shape. Our relationships are already tangled, our choices have already been made, our past decisions inexorably affect all that follows. And if the direction of our own lives already feels set, the course of the whole sweep of history and culture feels even more so. We can wish European colonists had taken an entirely different approach toward Indigenous people. We can wish leaders of the early industrial revolution had recognized the impact of burning carbon. We can wish we had been there on the Virginia shore in 1619 to direct the *White Lion* back to Angola, its human cargo never enslaved on this land. But our wishes are futile. Sin has been set in motion and compounded over centuries. Even if repentance begins right now, it feels too late for anything to change.

John sees the limits of the baptism he offers. Those who emerge squeaky clean from the Jordan will soon be covered again in the dust of the road. "I baptize you with water for repentance," he says, recognizing that his head-to-toe washing is only a sign of intention, not a guarantee of a new future. But John also sees that his baptism is not all that God has in store. Something even better is on its way.

When John describes the wrath to come and the ax at the root of the trees, it sounds, at first, like a threat. We are so accustomed to seeing a red cartoon devil among the flames that we cannot imagine being eager to enter the fire ourselves. An angry, flame-wielding Jesus sounds so different from the mild baby in the manger that we assume John has misunderstood the loving purpose of the incarnation.

But when we get distracted by his harsh images, we miss the promise in John's vision. Jesus is coming with fire, not to consume or destroy but so that our sins might be utterly incinerated, not merely flushed downstream. Jesus is coming with a winnowing fork, like a farmer separating good grain from husky chaff. He will keep what's best in us, and he will toss our regrets and our missteps, our petty faults and our horrifying evil, into a place from which they can never return. Jesus is coming with an ax, ensuring that what is wrong will never grow again. He will burn our sordid history to the ground and make possible a brand new future. Jesus is coming to offer the new beginning that seemed impossible, the utter transformation we yearn for, the fresh start that even John's baptism in the Jordan could never produce.

The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is on his way. Unquenchable fire turns out to be an excellent gift after all.