My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We read a part of this scripture in Advent not so very long ago, didn’t we? Sure we did, we read each year about preparing the way, and the person who helps us best understand that is good ol’ John the Baptist. Here he is again, the guy who lives eating wild honey and insects and lives away from the rest of us. And it probably strikes us as a little bit remarkable that he’s coming to tell us that, unlike his life, we should bind ourselves to a particular way of living. And it’s one that God has given from the beginning of creation. So you remember what those were? We read about THOSE in Advent, too, the week before all the talk about threshing floors and wheat and chaff. Share your abundance with those who have none. Be fair in business dealings and with your neighbors. Don’t extort anyone, and be happy with how much money you have and earn. NOW do we remember these things?

OK. Let’s move on.

John wants folks to turn their lives around. I think we all agree that’s a laudable goal. John also says that this work is needed in order to understand what’s coming next, that if they do this, someone who’s coming will save us all. And who wouldn’t want that? To be saved from oppressive government, unfair taxes, rules that infringe on freedoms. But the people then, as now, misinterpreted who was coming and why.

They wanted what John had to say right now, not wait. They wanted him to lead them, not some other person. And when he makes it clear that he is not the one who can do allllll these things they expect, they turned him in to Herod and he was imprisoned and beheaded.

But the people want relief then, as now, and it raises some fundamental questions about what we expect from our Messiah: What are they, and we, expecting? What are they, and we, searching for? Why do they want to know who, when, and how they will get their wishes fulfilled? Let’s think about this: in our pandemic chaos for quite a time, we only had ourselves to think about.

And we thought about these same questions. Although the answers to these questions vary widely even in the same family, the questions themselves are ones of identity and belonging. Our concepts of identity were certainly turned upside down in the last two years, right? And we don’t belong to many of the same ways and peoples we once encountered. In that way, we’re like these ancient Israelites: John said we need a new way of thinking, of both identity and belonging.

What John’s people don’t know by following him around and acting out his message is that they are becoming a community re-dedicated to God. John knows that Jesus coming after him is more powerful in both message and the ability to gather. But John tells them in ways that make them question how they should prepare. His message sounds really judgmental, all this wheat, and chaff, and fire. What does this mean? How do we know if we’re baptized with fire? How do we know we’re baptized with the Holy Spirit? If we asked a learned theologian, we’d get head answers, but not heart ones. The heart answer is, “I don’t know”. Grace means living with uncertainty, and our egos really hate not knowing.

But while John’s baptism is about turning around and starting anew—that’s why he doesn’t want to baptize Jesus—Jesus knows that he has to undergo what his people do in order for his ministry to have common experience, purpose, and meaning for the people he will take to the next steps once John lands in prison. Jesus will begin the process of identity forming and belonging that John started with this expectant crowd (which really is an allegory for us, right?).

Jesus wants to seal and affirm his followers with the same assurance that affirmed him—the Holy Spirit. Its impact seems fiery—wiping away former habits and ways that didn’t work well for us in life—but it’s gentle in the way we show it, in order that others may be curious to find out for themselves how to join in the work of God’s promises and God’s people.

I can tell you right now that people want to belong. But in the same breath I can also tell you that they can, and will, follow persons who feed their darker sides easier than following God. Why? Because God doesn’t promise monetary, political, or status gains. God doesn’t concern his followers with ever more stuff, power, or prestige. Our world gives very little credit to compassion, mercy, kindness, charity, and love. There is no trophy, blue ribbon, or cash prize for these things. Many folks, as a result, treat pursuing God as a hobby more than anything, something that’s fun to do once in a while but otherwise gets to be boring and old hat pretty fast once we start doing it.

So what is it in each of our own life experiences that brought us here, keeps us here, makes us expect that we won’t get easily bored or distracted? As we think about our life journeys with God and the people of God, what baptisms of water renewal or fiery spirit have we been through that make us want to be right here, right now? What contexts have nurtured each of our own identities to make God the priority in our lives? Or, if we’re honest, do we treat this church community and our life here as a hobby that gets interesting at Christmas, Easter, and chowder time but is otherwise not worth putting in the work? Nah, others will do it. Talking to strangers, being nice to people we don’t know, that’s not our thing. This is New Hampshire, after all. Hospitality is a high bar.

But that’s part of turning around, isn’t it? People are craving spaces where they can belong. Our new year will continue to have political polarization, COVID variants, ongoing oppression of people who do not look or act or think like WASPs. There will continue to be a growing rift between people’s pursuit of spirituality, organized religion, and an active worship life. And we Christians should continue to find ways to invite others to join us. But the question remains: how truly have we lived out our baptism in Spirit, water, and fire?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

When I arrived here we were, from a community gathering standpoint, battered. We could not gather. There was no vaccine. We were scared out of our minds. But we are 15 months on from that point, and it’s crucial to remind ourselves of our commitments to our faith community. Our baptismal vows help us resist the temptations of the world, and we need to believe that we are sealed and affirmed by the Holy Spirit as ones who have turned around and start anew. But do we have a new start in us? And where do we start?

We pulled off the Christmas Fair, but Barbie’s death left us rocking back on our heels. She was the ebullient, optimistic force and voice we often needed and wanted. She also would be telling us right now that we need start being church again. We have a rallying point in front of us in the George Floyd Quilt Exhibits coming to our church for two weeks. We will be having a series of public showings in the mornings, evenings, and weekends. And you know what that lets us do?

It means we can let people see we really do care for one another and humanity through our identity with a victim of wrongful violence. It means we can give voice to those who aren’t here in body, but their spirit cries out for justice and mercy. It means if others understand that injustice for one is injustice to us all, we can have common ground that transcends our polarizations and caricatures of one another.

We need to be renewed. As do the ways we invite others to join the faithful community that Jesus came to establish for us all. It’s just we’ll start with coffee and an open house. That’s enough. Thanks be to God, Amen.