



# THE NEW SHOFAR

Live today as if The End was tomorrow

What God demands is love not more worship

## Advent 2

*John calls upon us “do” something to bring Christ alive in the world*

The kind of language Matthew uses here draws a line between the period of the Old Testament (represented by the prophetic figure of John the Baptist) and the period of the New Covenant (represented by Jesus). According to non-biblical writings of the time, John was a pious Jewish preacher who preached a message of justice towards others and piety towards God. He called for a living faith, one manifested in the words and deeds of believers. It was vital they acted immediately as the Kingdom of God had arrived among the people. If the people were not prepared for the arrival of God’s chosen one, then they would miss out on the anticipated fulfillment of the divine promises made through the prophets.

*Repent for God wants to enliven the world through us*

What John is doing is making it clear a new time had come and that people needed to begin to think differently and to act in accord with the demands of this new era. The essential word used by John is repent (Greek:*metanoia*) a difficult one to translate into English. It has the sense of making a mental change of mind and includes the idea of regret for living life with God in the margins (or excluded altogether). It has to be more than simply saying “sorry” for it insists on some change in the way people live and act. One commentator translates it in this way (Meier) *within one must change one’s mind and heart about what is important in life and then change one’s outward life accordingly*. All of this comes about because the person has come to recognize the reality of God in their lives and it is this discovery of God that brings about the transformation. When John declares that the Kingdom of Heaven “has come” he is in fact saying *here comes the Kingdom* in the person of Jesus. This Kingdom can be experienced in Jesus the One sent by God. This Jesus is the way God enters into human history.

*Shub – turn your lives around! Repent!*

The Hebrew word behind John’s teaching here is *shub* which has the literal meaning of *turn around*. It brings with it connotations of a journey or a pilgrimage that is in danger of heading off in the wrong direction and arriving at a false destination. *Shub* has a physical sense – not just a change of mind and heart, but a transforming of every aspect of our lives in the world in the light of what God is revealing to us in Jesus. **Psalm 1:1** says it beautifully – *how blessed is the person who walks in the way of the Lord God*. God has a way for us to be walking and it is only the *way of the Lord* that will bring us to our created destiny. That same psalm acknowledges there are other “ways” but they are dead ends. They may give temporary or passing comfort but they will not endure. These are the “ways” of *sinners* and *scoffers*. *Shub – metanoia – repent* all call us in the one direction. Again **Psalm 1**...Those who walk this way are *like trees planted by streams of*

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[anathoth.hough@gmail.com](mailto:anathoth.hough@gmail.com) - [www.houghgod.com](http://www.houghgod.com)

*water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.*

### ***life in Christ demands an ever expanding way of living transformed by Grace***

This is a further shocking message from Matthew here. John is baptizing in the wilderness, and there confronts the pillars of institutional Judaism - the Pharisees and Sadducees. They appear to be seeking John's baptism and yet he turns on them and attacks them in the harshest of language. He calls them a *brood of vipers*. This is because they are coming for baptism but are not willing to transform their lives. They want to be a part of this new era proclaimed by John but want it on their terms, without his message upsetting the lifestyle in which they had become comfortable, a way of living they have worked out how to rationalize.

### ***What God wants is more love and not more liturgical actions***

What was John's problem with their thinking? They were stuck on the time-honoured idea that all God required was ancestry that could be traced back to Abraham. They had missed the message of the prophets, that what God wanted was *love not sacrifice*. They were to *show forth the fruits of repentance*. That is, in the way they lived they needed to display *clear evidence* of the action of God working in them. Now, those who were not "producing fruit" would have the axe of judgment taken to them. They would be the *chaff* blown away by the Spirit. There is no escaping the horror of this image. Sin has its own consequences and while these can be avoided during a person's life time, one day all men and women will stand before the throne of God to be judged – and the sinners will be like the *chaff blown away by the Spirit of God*, as the winnowing fork of judgment sorted them from *the good wheat that had been harvested*.

### ***For God's sake, do something about being transformed and do it today!***

For John, there is an impetus driving his call to repentance. For him, this judgment is immanent. With the arrival of Jesus on the scene, the judgment has arrived and the time for repenting is short. This probably explains some of the popularity of his message: the time when the promises of God are being fulfilled is now upon them. In Jesus. The time to act is now. None of us can say what might happen tomorrow and none can be guaranteed time for repentance as we lie on our deathbeds.

This message from John is one that shoots straight home to Christians of our own time – to all of us who are struggling to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. The one that strikes hardest is the one where John challenges the attitude of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He calls them a *brood of vipers* a term of address that resonates in the same way today as it did then. They had joined the mob in coming to John for baptism but were unprepared to change the way they were living. They saw no need to *repent* because they were Hebrews who could trace their ancestry back to Abraham. They had undergone circumcision, went to Temple, made their sacrifices, offerings and prayers and so were acceptable to God. They were Jews! What more could God want of them! It is the reply of John that is so clever: *if God wanted more Hebrews, he could turn these stones into Hebrews!* What God wants is always something more than numbers. Always something deeper. What God demands are lives producing *fruit that comes out of a transformed way of living*. It is not enough to be baptized. It is not enough to go to church on Sunday. It is not enough even to say our prayers and read our Bibles. What God is demanding is a life that has been transformed by the life, ministry, person and message of Jesus.

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**[anathoth.hough@gmail.com](mailto:anathoth.hough@gmail.com) - [www.houghongod.com](http://www.houghongod.com)**

***It is Advent 2.*** Where are we on our Advent pilgrimage? As we begin a new Church year, can we see evidence of our spiritual transformation and growth in Christ or is our spiritual and Church life the same as it was this time last year? What can I undertake this year to ***shub?*** Remember, the Gospels are always talking about concrete actions under the grace of God.