The Jordan River is 21 miles from Jerusalem at its closest point. Typically, the distance would require six or seven hours of walking – a whole day – to complete.

If I were a resident of Jerusalem in the days of John the Baptizer, I wonder if I would have wanted to undertake such a journey. Indeed, John the Baptizer was a spectacle to behold – wearing camel's hair and eating bugs. I might have some interest in seeing him.

But then I think about his message of repentance. When I think about preachers talking about repentance, I get this vision of someone shaking their finger at me and saying, "You better stop overeating or thinking bad thoughts about others or watching TV instead of praying. You better do all this or else God is going to rain fire and brimstone down on you." And, so I think, would I walk 21 miles to hear that? Even if John were a curiosity figure? Probably not, especially in a pandemic. I'm just too tired.

Yet, we know that people did make that journey. While they didn't have a pandemic to fatigue them, they did have the Romans' oppression to depress them. So, why would the New Testament people be more likely to make that journey than me?

Perhaps, the fault in my logic is in how John approached repentance. Maybe he wasn't just wagging his finger and asking them to cure our minor flaws. Instead, perhaps he was asking them to let go of things that prevent Jesus from fully coming into our hearts. Maybe he was asking them – and us today – to let go of all those past hurts and traumas to prepare the way for Jesus to enter.

That means letting go of that time when we were humiliated as a teenager.

Or letting go of our memory and pain when remembering a time someone caused us to feel diminished in front of others.

Or letting go of our pain of being in a triage situation where everyone needed our attention, and we could only help a few.

Or letting go of trauma from war or abuse or betrayal.

Many of us hold onto some hurt and anger from life experiences such as these. Sometimes we hold onto pain from many different occasions over many years. Holding onto this anger and hurt overburdens us. It's heavy. It can cause us to be overcritical of ourselves, which means we aren't as open to taking risks God wants us to take. If we turn the anger inward, we can become depressed.

For some of us, grudges are our identity. We have something that defines us – that of being a victim – and we gain a sense of purpose from our victimhood. To let go of it means we have to build a whole new identity with something else giving us strength and purpose. We think it's easier just to hold onto that grudge no matter how heavy it is.

Perhaps, this is what John calls us to repent from. Maybe he calls on us to be willing to risk giving up these grudges and this nursing of past hurts. Perhaps he calls us to replace the identity we have built up around these grudges with the identity we have in Christ. Maybe this is what we need to do to prepare the way of the Lord.

Giving up our grudges, our pain, and our hurts takes courage. Yet, it comes with a promise. When we make a straight way for God in our hearts, God comforts us; God nourishes us. God heals us. God makes us lighter.

Perhaps you, like me, remember younger days when we were lighter. Indeed, I was lighter physically, and I could run and jump in ways I can no longer do now that I am heavier. Perhaps, we all remember days when our hearts were lighter, too – when they sang with joy – when they had a way prepared for Jesus to enter and change them, to make them open to love and joy.

To be released of those burdens and lightened with God's comfort is an incredible gift. One definition of repentance is getting your affairs in order with a view to reconciliation with God. Allowing ourselves to get rid of that part of our identity that still feels past hurts or anger is one way to achieve this repentance.

Walking 21 miles seems farther and harder the heavier we've become with our burdens. The lighter we are, the faster we walk. Yet the heavier we are, the more delighted we'll feel when we've gotten rid of those burdens and cleared a path in our hearts for the comforting love of Jesus.

You know, I think John's call to repentance is a call for me. Journeying deep within my heart to let go of those burdens makes sense. When we let go of the burdens, God comforts us. When we let go of all that hurt, we prepare a straight way for Jesus in our hearts.