

December 4, 2022
Second Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 3:1-12

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, the 3rd chapter, which you heard read earlier.

John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isaiah's Old Testament prophesy of the forerunner to the Messiah. John is:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” (Matthew 3:3; cf: Isaiah 40:3)

Much like the days we live in today, in the time of John, people were lost in idolatry and sinful rebellion. So God called him to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message was:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

Many times when we think of the ***Kingdom of heaven***, we think of a physical place, God's Kingdom in heaven where Jesus rules as King of kings and Lord of lords. But in the overall context of St Matthew's Gospel and the grammar in the original language, the ***kingdom of heaven*** or the ***kingdom of God*** can also be interpreted as the ***reign of God***. This ***kingdom*** and ***reign of God*** which John is proclaiming is not primarily a place – but it is a divine action that occurs wherever Jesus is, through His words and deeds. (cf: Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 48–49)

When John says: ***“... the kingdom of heaven is at hand...”***, he is talking of both, the ***now*** and the ***not yet***. The ***now***: announcing the Father working through His Son to bring God's reign into history on earth in ***judgment*** against His enemies, and in ***salvation*** for all who call upon His Name. The ***not yet***: announcing the nearness of Judgment Day and that the last days have begun. John is announcing that God Himself, in the flesh of man, is about to break into human history to reign and restore His creation through His earthly ministry, and would one day return to pronounce final judgment on all mankind.

Now, you ***are not*** John's ***exact*** audience. You are not the brood of vipers to which he is preaching. (cf: Matthew 3:7) You know who Jesus is. You know that His tomb is empty. The Holy Spirit has called you to faith. You have been Baptized into His death and resurrection and have begun a life of ***repentance***. (cf: Romans 6:3–4) Nevertheless, the fact that John is warning the Pharisees and Sadducees about the ***not yet***, Judgment Day when all ***believers*** will be gathered

as wheat into the barn of God's heavenly Kingdom and the *unbelievers* will be destroyed in the unquenchable fires of hell, this tells us that John is preaching to you and me and all people. He gives three important aspects of preparing for the second coming of the Lord:

1. By *repenting* and confessing your sins.
2. By living in your baptismal grace.
3. By bearing the fruit of *repentance*.

Concerning *repentance*, in our text, the word *repent* is an imperative. It is God's imperative meaning: "*Repent now!*" *Repent* means "*change one's mind, turn around, feel remorse, and be converted.*" (BGAG, 640) *Repentance* is not reserved only for unbelievers. It is an imperative for you and me and all people. When Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, the very first of his thesis states:

"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." (LW 31, 25)

Just as Lent is a season of *repentance* and faith, so too, is Advent. For you, brothers and sisters in Christ, a life of *repentance* means to quit kidding yourselves about how good and holy you are. It is time to daily recognize your sins in thought, word, and deed – and *repent*.

It is time to turn from your wrongs paths and return to the Lord your God and seek His forgiveness. Immerse yourself daily in God's Holy Word so that His Word drowns out the tempting voice of the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh. Let God's Word shape how you think and live so that you can walk in the ways of God's Commandments which is His good and gracious will for your life.

The Lord's command to *repent* is not only about being sorry for your sins, but it also includes faith, believing that God *is* loving and gracious to forgive *all* your sins for sake of Christ Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. You cannot do it alone. Without the Holy Spirit creating and sustaining faith in your stone, cold, unfaithful heart, all the weeping and sorrow over your sin gets you nowhere.

They claim that the three hardest words to say are: "*I am sorry.*" But a simple "*I am sorry*" could mean that you are only sorry that you got caught. I would suggest that there are three other words that are even harder. Look someone in the eye and say: "*Please forgive me.*" When you sin against God or someone else, you would rather argue until you are blue in the face than to tell God or that person, "*I am sorry... please forgive me.*" Confession of guilt and asking for forgiveness is evidence of contrition and *repentance* – and that is what we see in our Gospel text. We see evidence of *repentance*, evidence of faith worked by the Holy Spirit as people come to John from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the region near the Jordan, to be baptized and confess their sins. (cf: Matthew 3:5–6)

Not *everyone* who comes to John is truly repentant. The Pharisees and Sadducees come only hoping to investigate why the people were flocking to John. By the power of the Holy Spirit, John knew they were unrepentant and denounced them, calling them a brood of vipers, warning them to bear *fruits of repentance*, because God's Judgment Day is coming when all *believers*

will be gathered as wheat into the barn of God's heavenly Kingdom and the *unbelievers* will be destroyed in the unquenchable fires of hell.

Advent is a time to be honest with God and with one another by confessing your sins of what you have done and what you have left undone. We have become an unhinged, rude, and heartless society: betraying, slandering, and telling outright lies about others. We desire extravagance in lifestyle and proudly parade our vanity before others. We are guilty of all sorts of immorality, idolatry, jealousy, selfishness, and greed.

So heed John's proclamation by preparing the way of the Lord by turning from your shameful ways, feel remorse, and make sure that you are back in the rhythm of confessing your sins to God and to one another, for our Lord willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. It is time to turn around, change your way of thinking, and let God's Word shape how you think and how you live.

A second aspect of preparation for our Lord's coming is to live in your baptismal grace. Ancient Jews had a long list of ceremonial washings to purify them from their uncleanness. John's Baptism was different. It was a one-time washing for the forgiveness of sins that looked *forward* to the Last Day when our Lord will separate the wheat from the chaff. (cf: Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 172) It was a Baptism that laid the foundation for the Christian Baptism you have received.

In your Baptism, you received the Holy Spirit, who united you with all the saving work of Christ: His obedient life, His death as payment for your sins, and His resurrection for your justification. (cf: Romans 4:25) You prepare for Christ's coming by living in this baptismal grace, knowing its promises are yours, and treasuring it while living in its power and peace.

If you do not already, this Advent season is a good time to begin to live in – and – treasure your baptismal grace. In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say: ***“In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen,”*** reminding you of the Trinitarian formula that you were marked with in Baptism. It is not something that merely happened in the past. You do not say: *“I was Baptized.”* No, you say: *“I am Baptized.”* It is your present tense reality. Christ's precious gifts given you in Baptismal waters are yours every day.

A third aspect of preparation for Christ's return is in John's command:

“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Matthew 3:8)

Bearing fruits of repentance is not optional. John warns us of the judgment to come, saying:

“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:10)

What does this mean? The Holy Spirit, given you in Baptism, works repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. That is why it is important to let God's Word shape how you think and how you live – and to live in your Baptismal grace. It is not *you* who produces good fruit, but the *Holy Spirit*, working through you that produces good fruit. St. Paul tells us these fruits are:

“... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, [and] self-control...” (Galatians 5:22–23)

You prepare for Christ coming by bearing fruits of good works and deeds in service to your neighbor that flow from the love you have for the One who bled and died for you. Bearing fruits such as helping out with projects and boards and committees right here in our church, giving your tithes and offerings so that the Gospel might continue to be proclaimed in this place and around the world.

The **reign of God** is at hand. God's divine action that occurs wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. In the Absolution God forgives you all your sins: sins of lying, immorality, idolatry, jealousy, selfishness, and greed.

Just as God called John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus in an idolatrous and sinful world, he calls you and me to also prepare the way for our Lord's return. It all starts by repenting and confessing your sins, living in your baptismal grace, and bearing the fruits of repentance worked by the Holy Spirit.

At the close of St. John's book of the Revelation, Jesus says:

"Surely I am coming soon." (Revelation 22:20)

To you and me, it might seem like His return is slow, but St Peter reminds us:

"⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus has won forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for you – and in return you trust and receive everything that you do not deserve. Should not you and I want others to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ that we already have? So, we prepare the way of Christ's return by calling others to repent and confess their sins, to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and to bear the fruit of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. Repent and rejoice, for:

"Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation."
(Zechariah 9:9)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.