

Second Sunday of Advent • December 8, 2019ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 3:1-12 (Isaiah 11:1-10)

“Get Ready for the Lord”

Christmas is a little over two weeks away. Is everything looking like it should?

As Pastor Meehan reminded us last weekend, this season of preparation we call Advent isn't really about getting ready for Christmas: Advent is a time for us to get ready for Jesus' return among us as the Lord of heaven and earth. He's kind of a big deal! How are you and I supposed to get ready for the Lord of all creation to be here with us? We put up trees and greens and lights to celebrate his birth as a baby. We're still working on getting all those decorations up at my home – how about you? So what preparation needs to be happening as we look to our Lord's second advent? Let's listen and see what we might learn from right before he came onto the scene in Judea some 2,000 years ago.

Hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!*” His name was John, son of Zechariah, an elderly priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, Mary's relative. John's out away from the great city of Jerusalem, dressed like a desert dweller, reminding people of the biblical prophets who'd come centuries before. He's calling his hearers to repent, to get ready for the Lord's return by turning to God in faith. And he's telling them stunning news: the kingdom of heaven, the reign of the Lord is near! Divine action has begun, the Lord is on His way! The people are getting excited; they've been waiting for this fulfillment of God's promise for hundreds of years. No wonder, then, that even the elite Pharisees and Sadducees come out to see John and hear his message for themselves.

These two groups both think they have things figured out. The Pharisees are religious purists, committed to rigorously obeying hundreds of law-codes to be in a right standing before God. They'd fast twice a week, going far beyond the requirement to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. They believe they are already prepared for the Messiah's arrival. But their focus on the outward observance of law has kept them from understanding the greater importance of love and mercy. The Sadducees, on the other hand, aren't longing for the coming of the Messiah as others do. They're fairly well-off, coming from the rich landowning families of the country, dominating the Jewish supreme council, the Sanhedrin. They probably don't understand a need for the baptism of repentance that this odd man in the desert is offering. John knows that neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees are ready for the Lord's imminent arrival and reign. Everything isn't looking like it should. But is it too late?

Today's Scripture readings for the Second Sunday of Advent point us towards the experience of the coming kingdom of heaven, the reign of the Lord John proclaimed that the Messiah brings into the world. On the one hand, the Messiah, the shoot from the stump of Jesse, delivers **rescue** for all who repent and trust in him, receiving the blessings of the Spirit who rests upon him. On the other hand, those who reject the Messiah and remain unrepentant will receive the **doom** of the judgment that each one of us has earned with our sins. There's no middle ground, there are no other paths from which the people might choose. The coming Lord stands ready to start the harvest of rescue, a harvest that has already begun with John's preaching.

So how do you get ready for the Lord? You're not a Pharisee or a Sadducee. You're here today, I'm guessing, because you've already heard about Jesus, who he is and what he has done to rescue you and bring you into a restored relationship with God. For Christians, the repentance to which you and I are called isn't the same thing as that to which John called his hearers: if you've been given the Spirit's gift of faith, you can't turn from unbelief. By the working of the Spirit, though, you and I *can* turn away from the things in life that are trying to turn our attention away from our Lord and his love for us. **You can change your mind in a way that impacts your actions and life choices, looking to God. That's repentance.**

In the first of his famous 95 Theses, Martin Luther wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” For the Christian, repentance isn't meant to be about “fleeing from the wrath to come,” as John the Baptist put it. Jesus took on the entirety of God's wrath on the cross for you. He put the sign of his cross upon you in Baptism, marking you as wheat, as John puts it, wheat which will be gathered into the Lord's presence. You are already a part of the coming reigning of heaven. You and I aren't meant to be sorry for our sin out of fear of being thrown into fire; rather, we should feel sorrow for our sin because our sin pushes us away from our Lord, it runs away from his grace and the life that he would have us experience. We repent because we

recognize that we have gone off in the wrong direction and want the turning-around that the Holy Spirit brings into the Christian's life. **Our motivation for repentance is no longer based in fear of judgement but in the desire to be more Christ-like in how we live.**

You have the promise of God in Christ to forgive your sin. This promise doesn't come because you've earned it. You just receive it. That's God's grace. You can have confidence in the saving work of Jesus, the one who has brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

You have the new life that God creates in those He saves. You can bear fruit in keeping with repentance, as John exhorted the Pharisees and Sadducees, not because you've got it all together and everything in your life looks the way it should, but because you are connected to Jesus, the "shoot from the stump of Jesse." (Isaiah 11:1) In repentance, we look to Christ, and he shapes us to be more and more like him. Connected to him, you can't help but bear his fruit as he works in you and through you to bless the world around you.

God gives gifts to His Church, even in this getting-ready season of Advent. One such gift is the practice of individual confession and absolution. You might be surprised to know that this practice is something that Martin Luther encouraged people to keep, to never let fall into disuse. Individual confession is not intended to be an obligation, but rather as an opportunity to experience God's grace in the lifting of a burdened conscience. You can come in – appointments help! – and the pastor will vest, taking you through the rite of confession and absolution, and whatever you confess us under the Seal of the Office: it's between you and God. You get to hear God's personal word of forgiveness as Christ's righteousness is given to you, as you hear the assurance that you are our Lord's beloved child.

This weekend, we'll see another gift given in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. More than John's baptism of repentance in the desert, this is where the Holy Spirit gives the gift of new life. This is where we are transformed from people who are spiritually dead, enemies of God, and made to be brothers and sisters with Jesus. This is where God connects us with Christ, the "hope of the Gentiles" (Romans 15:12), and welcomes us into the kingdom of heaven.

It's Advent. It's time to get ready for the Lord. So let us repent, let us acknowledge that everything isn't looking like it should. And let us receive God's gifts so that we might look more and more like Jesus, "the root of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:10), our Lord, our hope.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.'" – Matthew 3:3