

*Second Sunday in Advent*  
December 5, 2010  
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Matthew 3:1-12

*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

The spirit of Christmas is in the air, isn't it? Preparations have begun. The children are getting ready to ring out the good news in a couple of weeks. Yesterday, we even had our first real snowfall. But once again, just like every year in our Gospel reading for the second Sunday in Advent, here he comes, John the Baptist that is, pouring rain on our Christmas parade. Every year at this time he appears, eyes blazing, long finger pointing at us, thundering judgement. Just when we have visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads he makes us feel guilty. Just when you think it's safe to start enjoying the holidays, here comes John the Baptist to cast a cloud of gloom and guilt over everything. As children are dreaming of i-pods, games, and toys covered in ribbons, John is shouting: "**Repent.**" As adults are searching for the perfect gifts for their loved ones, John is busy proclaiming: "**The ax is already at the root of the trees!**" We are eager to sing "*Joy to the World*" and the Church sends a wild-eyed, locust-eating, desert prophet.

So what's the point? Why, when we are ready to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem, do we first see John in the wilderness of Judea? Why does he appear days before every Christmas to make us feel bad? A professor at our seminary about a hundred years ago, once wrote, "**Take away the aroused conscience and you might as well turn the churches into dancing halls**" (Becker). Do you understand the important point he was making? What he means is: if people are no longer troubled by their sins, if they no longer wonder about what might happen to them if they should die, if they are no longer concerned about the wrath and punishment of God - then the church won't have any reason to exist - then the church will serve no useful purpose in the world anymore.

What he said about the church, we might say about the celebration of Christmas. Take away the aroused conscience, and you might as well turn the celebration of Christmas into a New Year's party. If we are no longer troubled by our guilt, if we are no longer concerned about the wrath and punishment of God, if we no longer see that we need saving from our sins - then the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem loses all point and purpose and has no real significance for us.

And that is why we need John the Baptist, and why we have always looked upon the Advent season as a time of preparation for our hearts - a time of repentance - a time to remind ourselves that we are sinners who need saving. When we sing "*Tis the season to be jolly,*" we might remember that tis the season to do some serious thinking about what our life would be like—or, even more important, what our death would be like—if Jesus had not come into our world. Therefore, we thank God for sending John the Baptist to remind us: **A Repentant Heart is a Ready Heart.**

The message & ministry of John the Baptist can really be summarized by these two sentences in our text: "***Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near...Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.***" John prepares people. He wants them ready. Why? He announces: ***the kingdom of heaven is near.*** God is about to reveal His plan. The Lord is on His way to save His people. John is letting people know that the Savior is coming. Jesus is coming to live, suffer, die, and rise again for the salvation of all people. But John also speaks of a winnowing fork and unquenchable fire. People need to be ready because this same Jesus who comes to save, will also judge every soul. Every person will face this Judge at their death and on the last day and all those who are outside of God's kingdom of grace will be swept away like chaff into a fiery furnace. So John wants people ready for both Christ's first and second coming.

So how is a person prepared? John says: "***Repent.***" This is what makes a person ready for Jesus. What is repentance? The word used means to perceive or see differently, or to change one's mind. It involves a change of heart, and a complete change of direction in a person's life. Contrary to what some believe, this is not a change we can work for ourselves. This change must be worked by the Lord. Repentance is always worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word. So God sends the forerunner John with His Word, with a message of law. John uses the law to prepare the way for the Lord. The law removes all obstacles. It cuts off every avenue of escape. He shows people their sins - how they lie and cheat - how they are greedy and lustful - how they fail to listen and obey the Lord and His Word. The law makes it clear - the wages of their sin is death. We are sinners. We deserve punishment. We deserve death. We deserve hell. There is no getting around God's law. And many heard the message from John loud and clear. We read: "***People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins.***" People now saw their sins for what they are - a terrible offense against a holy God deserving of God's wrath and punishment. So they confessed them. They admitted what they had done and failed to do. They admitted they are in serious need of help.

Thankfully, the message God gave to John doesn't end with the law. He has good news to share as well. Help is coming. John points the people to Jesus as "***the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world***" (John 1). Jesus would become the perfect lamb of Sacrifice, for them and all people. Jesus will pay the awful price of sin. Jesus will suffer God's wrath on the cross and die to take away the sins of the world.

People need not fear sin, death, or hell for Jesus is the Savior. In Jesus, all have life and forgiveness. John points to this Savior, a Savior so powerful John feels unfit to carry His sandals. This Savior sends the Holy Spirit to work powerfully through the Word & Sacraments to bring and keep people in saving faith. Many ***“confessing their sins,...were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”*** Through baptism, the Lord gives this faith. Through baptism, the Lord washes sin away. Please understand repentance has two parts, confessing our sin and then trusting in our Savior. This is repentance - turning away from sin, and turning in faith to the Savior who takes our sins away.

God worked repentance in some people. They had hearts ready for the coming Savior. Others were not prepared. The Pharisees and Sadducees also came to be baptized by John. They felt entitled to this new practice of baptism people were flocking to in the desert. But these religious leaders stressed only an outward observance to the law and John knew the hearts of these men. They did not come to confess their sins. As John sees them, he doesn't start by engaging them in pleasant conversation. Instead, he warns ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

These Pharisees and Sadducees were a brood of vipers - they were deceivers, offspring of the liar, the devil. They saw no need to be saved because they were Abraham's children. But John wants to see fruit. Repentance always bears fruit - fruits of faith or works that flow freely from our faith. But there was no repentance here. There was no confession of sin and no confession of faith. There were no actions. These men opposed the Lord and His plan of salvation and sought to earn heaven by their own efforts. They are not prepared for Christ's coming, and without repentant hearts unfortunately neither will they be for Jesus' second coming.

Isn't John the Baptist still preparing the way for the coming Savior? Are we ready? Are our hearts repentant hearts? John also tells us: ***“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”*** If a person keeps saying they are sorry and that God's Word and church are important, but in their actions they keep neglecting the Word and keep walking further away from Jesus, do you think John might proclaim: ***“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”***? What do you think the Baptist would say to a young couple living in sin or a couple ready to give up on marriage? If they say they feel sorry for what they are doing and know what God's will is for His gifts of sex and marriage, but they continue to live in disobedience to that Word, do you think the Baptist would cry ***“repent”***? Do you think John would shy away from pointing to those sins that we too often give into with little resistance? Don't you think the Baptist would want us to understand the danger of our sins and our need for help in a Savior? Wouldn't our God want us to take seriously the words we spoke this morning: ***“I have disobeyed you...have done what is evil & failed to do what is good...deserve punishment both now and in eternity...am truly sorry...I pray have mercy on me a sinner.”***

Once again, as every year at this time, here he comes, John the Baptist that is calling to all: ***“Repent.. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”*** If our consciences are aroused and the law makes us tremble over

our sins, then, John the Baptist is doing his job, an important job, again this Advent. Yes, it is scary to think of what our lives would be like, or more importantly, what our death's would be like without Jesus. Seeing our sins for what they are and confessing our sins for what they deserve, leads us to truly appreciate what Christmas is all about. John the Baptist prepares hearts to celebrate what God really did for us in Bethlehem. He makes us sad so we can be all the more glad about the depths our Savior went to, going even to a cross and out of a tomb, so He could announce to each of us: **“I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”** Now with repentant hearts, this Christmas it won't just be with our lips that we are ready to sing: *“Joy to the World, the Lord has come.”* Amen.