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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday in Advent (Series A)

December 4, 2016

Text: Matthew 3:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea” (vs. 1). Too easily this sentence is reduced to mere recollection of earlier days, you know, “back in the good ol’ days.” But that’s not what Matthew means by saying “In those days.” Rather, Matthew is signaling for us and all readers and preachers of his gospel that God’s end-time promises are coming to their fruition. The eschatological work of salvation for the entire world began in those days. It began, wonder upon wonders, in the Judean desert preaching and baptizing ministry of the John the Baptist.

John’s preaching was simple and straightforward. It can be summarized in a single word: repent. And the promise of repentance can be summarized in a short phrase, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And the foundation upon which repentance and hope are built is the Coming One who will baptize with “the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand because One is coming who will baptize all repentant believers with the Holy Spirit and with fire. That’s the essence of John’s ministry.

Very simple really, so simple that it caused a bit of a fuss in his day. He preached repentance and baptized people as they confessed their sins. No pre-packaged preaching. No fancy oratory. Simple, direct, but filled with divine power. This is the time of turning away from sins. This is the time of conversion, turning away from dead works to a living, abiding hope in the soon-coming Messiah: God the Father’s end-time King of kings and Lord of lords.

No sugar coated preaching heard on the banks of the Jordan. No appeal to man’s nobler nature. Not here. Turn away from those sins unto new life or be gone with you. No playing around with spirituality or religiosity or mysticism or whatever. It’s now or never.

John's preaching was direct and his appearance odd, to say the least. He wore camel's hair for clothing, held on by a leather belt. He ate locust, you know, grasshoppers mixed with a little wild honey (vs. 4). And he lived a hermit's life in the Judean desert wilderness (vs. 1).

You might think such a person would drive people away! But the people respond according to vs. 5–6, "Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

Surely, some found John obnoxious and offensive. Listen to his message to society's cream of the crop, the Scribes and Pharisees, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (vs. 7). Evil servants of evil fit for God's eternal wrath is basically what John is calling the Pharisees and Sadducees.

John couldn't stand religious play-acting. He exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (vs. 8). In other words, don't come out here and act as if you had no need of true repentance, faith, and obedience. Good works of true conversion are lacking because there is no faith. And John exposed their idolatrous trust in their family lineage, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (vs. 9). Those Scribes and Pharisees believed they were God's children of promise simply because they had a Jewish mother. Not good enough, not even close. There must be faith and love in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, in the God who calls people to loving faith in Him.

John didn't pull any punches with folks who didn't see a need for confessing their sins and living a life of repentance and faith. "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (vs. 10). For John, it's simple and direct. Confess and repent of your sin or you will be cut down in God's judgment and be punished in His eternal fire.

John's message of "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is as needed today as it was "in those days." Too easily we trust in things above God. You know, things like my own moral character. Unlike that riff raff that was being baptized by John, I'm a pretty decent guy. I'm a good citizen from a good family. I hold to traditional family values; I say the pledge of allegiance and yes, I pray in school! I'm a dyed in the wool Lutheran with decrees behind my name to prove it. I know all five solas of the

Reformation; got the catechism memorized. And I'm in Church almost every time the door is open. Why should I fear the wrath to come? To any all such misplaced trust: repent, be converted by God's grace for the kingdom of heaven is at hand and make ready for the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

But there's more to John's preaching than exposing everybody's sin. Look at vs. 11, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, who sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Someone is coming. He will give you the Holy Spirit. He will cleanse you from sin through His purifying fires. He's the One I'm getting you ready for, says John. Don't think I'm the best God has to offer. I'm just the opening introduction.

When John says someone is coming, he's referring to the Lord Jesus. Jesus will baptize His people in the Holy Spirit. That means all who repent of their sins and turn to Jesus will be completely and totally immersed in the Holy Spirit. Those repentant sinners will be purged in the cleansing fires of Christ's forgiveness won for the world through His cross and empty tomb. Nothing short of God's eternal kingdom comes to them in all his gracious and glorious fullness.

This saving work of Jesus was completed in His death and resurrection. It comes to us in the waters of Holy Baptism and continues throughout all of life. For us baptized, believing, repentant Christians, every day is one of dying to sins; that is, turning from the sins that so easily beset us in the knowledge that our sinful nature must be battled and resisted day by day through our Lord's grace and mercy. For us baptized, believing, repentant Christians, everyday is one of living in the kingdom of heaven by faith in the Lord Jesus as we bring forth the good fruit of faith, hope, and love in our daily lives. Every day is one of standing before God the Father with a clear conscience and a certain hope of the resurrection on the Last Day.

And yet, there is more to John's preaching ministry. The reason we are called to live a repentant life in the kingdom of heaven by the grace of Jesus, the One who cleanses us with the Holy Spirit and fire, is that a great Day of Judgment is coming; an awesome day of separation. Listen to vs. 12, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." The same Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire will also separate believers from unbelievers, wheat from the chaff. Believers will be gathered together unto eternal salvation. Unbelievers will be burned with unquenchable fire.

Dear saints of God, this congregation's ministry is to take up the mantle of John's work and continue to call all people to confess their sins, be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit and live as newborn citizens of God's eternal kingdom as they await the judgment of the Last Day. The call begins among us here; judgment begins at the house of God (I Pet. 4:17). We are to live in God's kingdom by repentance, faith, and obedience.

And then we extend that message of grace and mercy to our community and world. The message is the same. Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus forgives all sins, saves and redeems all repentant sinners by the grace of the Holy Spirit and fire. Get ready, the Day of Judgment is coming and nobody will be exempt.

Such is the urgency in our end-times preaching.

The kingdom of heaven is present now among us. This is the time of repentance and faith. The Lord Jesus forgives and cleanses all who hear and trust His saving message. The kingdom is prepared for you.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" ... (Rom. 15:13).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.