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

Second Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 6, 2015

Text: Luke 3:1–14

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

Ever thought God was absent? Silent and unresponsive to your prayers? If so, you're hardly alone. God's people have felt these kinds of these for thousands of years. It's not without reason that the centuries leading up to the births of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus were called the "silent years." For 400 years, Israel had not heard a prophetic message. It's as if God went silent. To be sure, the books of Moses were read along with the Psalms, other historical writings, and the written works of the prophets. But after the ministry of Malachi, there was a deafening silent. No prophetic word.

And do you want to know what that last prophetic word said? Here it is (Mal 4:4–6):

“⁴Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Remember the law of Moses. The prophet Elijah is coming to lead God's people in repentance lest God's wrath break out upon the land. A direct message of law and gospel, to be sure. And then silence, for 400 years! That's a long time to wait for the coming of a prophet like Elijah; that's a long time to pray for a promised time of repentance and renewal; and then receive no answer.

Yet the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had not forgotten His people nor His divine promises. In the nitty gritty details of history, the Lord remembered His people and acted. In the 15th year of Tiberias Caesar, during the provincial rules of Pontius Pilate, the Tetrarchs Herod, Philip, and Lysanias, while the Jewish high priesthood was filled by the likes of Annas and Caiaphas, God's Word came to John the Baptist in the wilderness (vs. 1–2)! Finally, the time of silence was over! This is no fairy tale story, however. God's Word breaks into real history during the lives of real politicians and

religious rulers, into the lives of genuine real people with sins and sorrow, triumphs and failures.

And what did God's real people hear when they went out to hear this prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance..." (vs. 7–8a). Well. One wonders what people thought of this renewed prophetic word. You go to the trouble of traveling out to the Jordan River to hear God's Word proclaimed by the first prophet in 400 years and you get called a bunch of slinking snakes for your troubles. On top of that, you're told God's wrath is coming. And you'd better get ready for it by receiving a baptism of repentance leading to a life of repentance.

This is the Elijah we've been praying for, for 400 years? Kind of looks like Elijah, camels' hair and leather belt. Eats weird food like Elijah, locusts and wild honey. Preaches of stern message of repentance and judgment like Elijah did on Mount Carmel. Preaches in the place where Elijah was swept away into heaven by a whirlwind. This John will turn the hearts of the children to their fathers in repentance? That's what the angel Gabriel said John would do when he (i.e., Gabriel) announced to Zechariah that John would prepare the way of the Lord (c.p. Lk 1).

Many heard this end-times Elijah, repented and believed. The Lord works through His servant to work His end-times wonders of repentance and faith. Although that servant appears lowly and humble, although the word preached is rough, although the baptism appears rude and common, the Lord performs His work of repentance and renewal before the day of wrath arrives. That Last Days work of repentance, faith, and the fruit of repentance evidenced in daily life began in the ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, that great prophetic voice of repentance and faith, had two strikes against him: 1) his outward appearance and 2) his message. He was the kind of man, I like to imagine, that caused mothers to shield their eyes and move along quickly. His rough manners and solitary fanaticism troubled folks, especially anyone who had power and prestige to lose. We see that in the religious and political leaders. He didn't care about their pedigrees. "And do not begin 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. 8).

John didn't care a lick about your family lineage, who your father or mother were. God can raise up Jewish children from these something as common as stones by the

river. He wouldn't care about our Lutheranism either – I've been a life-long Lutheran born into a family of life-long Lutherans. He wouldn't care about any of our religious experiences: I gave my heart to Jesus at such and such an event. Or I've had this or that mystical experience. To such things, John would simply say, "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. 9). Without repentance, faith, and good works, it's all fodder for the fire.

That was the heart and core of John's preaching: 1) contrition, true heartfelt terror of conscience over sins, 2) faith in God to save sinners, and 3) the fruits worthy of repentance, that is, a change of the entire life and character for the better (c.p. Ap XII:28). Those three themes – contrition, faith, and the fruits of repentance – form the sum and substance of John's preaching.

Malachi prophesied about a time of repentance. That renewal began in John. Many men and women went out to hear John. They believed and received a baptism of repentance. So they asked him, "What then shall we do?" (vs. 10). One might expect John to list all kinds of extraordinary things he expected repentant believers to do. Become missionaries to foreign lands. Form religious orders and spend your time fasting and praying and slowly working yourself to death in the name of God. No, he preached no such thing. Vs. 11–14 describe what I like to call vocational repentance. In other words, think about your various vocations and callings in life:

Vs. 11: help feed the poor, the hungry, the under-clothed – vocation of being neighbor

Vs. 12–14: fulfill your jobs faithfully without cheating the people around you – vocation of being an employee

In other words, the life of repentance, faith, and good works is lived out in the realm of your day to day lives as fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, son, daughters, employers, employees, citizens, neighbors, and all around human being. And never are we to think that we've done enough. For the life of repentance, faith, and good works is a life of love. And the love that God pours into our hearts and minds through His Spirit is inexhaustible. At any and every point in the day, that person who just happens to be next to you needs your love. God doesn't need your love and good works. But your flesh and blood neighbor does. To love God is to love your neighbor.

To have a right standing before God, one must trust in His divine mercy and compassion which He gives to repentance sinners. John would later preach, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). That divine Lamb was Jesus. He too would hear John’s preaching, receive John’s sinners’ baptism of repentance, and take the sins of the world – that includes your sins – to His cross. And those sins will never come back. Jesus has taken them away.

It is in Christ’s mercy and love that you will be able to stand before God in the Day of Judgment. Yes, that Day is coming. Holy Scripture is clear about that. Our hope is established in Christ alone and everything He did to redeem and cleanse and adopt sinners like you and me. Our repentance and good works don’t save us. Repentance is God’s work leading us to Christ who saves, forgives, and redeems unto eternal life. The good works we do flow grow out of that saving trust in the Lord Jesus. Christ alone is our hope and salvation. The Apostle Paul’s prayer for the Philippian Christians (Phil 1:9–11) brings all the elements of repentance, faith in Christ for eternal salvation, and good works, together. May it be our prayer too!

⁹And it is my prayer that your love ⁹may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

The days of silence are over. Our God has heard and answers. John prepared the way. Christ has come. These are the days of repentance, faith, and good works, to the glory and praise of God.

✠ 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.