

John's Baptism of Repentance

December 5, 2021

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

Today marks the lighting of the second Advent candle, which means that Christmas is getting closer. And it's always nice to see the sanctuary beautifully decorated with the poinsettias, the wreaths, and of course the Advent candles. This season of Advent is the time of the year that we prepare for Christmas. And as of today, there are only 20 more days left.

The church has a couple more things to be done. We plan to hang a couple of strands of lights on some of the trees outside. And yet, even then, we still won't be ready. Because, as we heard in our Gospel reading for today, preparing for Christ's coming isn't about buying Christmas presents, sending out Christmas cards, or putting up Christmas decorations. Rather it's about repentance. To make sure that our hearts and minds are ready to receive Christ when He comes again.

Now, you might've noticed that in Luke's Gospel reading for today, it doesn't talk about how John was clothed or what he ate. Instead, it starts by defining all the prominent leaders of the time. They were all arranged in their place by God. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests, and John, the son of Zechariah, was out in the wilderness, a place where someone might get lost when the word of God came to him. Having received it, he went throughout the region of the Jordan river, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. In doing so, he fulfilled the prophecy written by Isaiah:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all the flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

For hundreds of years, the world had waited and even ached for the promised Messiah. And now, John the Baptist began to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming ministry. People came out to see and hear John preach. They wanted to hear his proclamation of repentance and wanted to be baptized in it.

But that didn’t mean that it was easy on the ears. In fact, some of us might’ve found it offensive. For if there’s no sense of sin, there’s no need for a Savior. And even though the truth isn’t always easy to hear at times, without repentance there can’t be forgiveness. So, while John was primarily speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come among the people listening to him, his words could also be applied to most of those who came to see his baptism of repentance:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. 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. 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.”(Luke 3:7b-9)

Why would John say such a thing? So that the hearts and minds of his hearers might be softened, lives might be turned around, sins forgiven, and many would be prepared for the gift of salvation that Jesus would bring. As someone once said, *“How can we understand our need for forgiveness if we haven’t recognized the depth of our sin?”* So, it’s good for us to hear

and take John's words of repentance to heart. Because if Jesus came again right now – this very moment – I'm not too sure how ready we would be...all of us can be a little stubborn, haughty, and selfish at times.

John makes clear that judgment waits for those who do not repent. ***“Even now the axe is already at the root of the tree, and those who don't bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** (Luke 3:9) While we look forward to the celebration of our Lord's first coming, He will come again as the Judge. With a winnowing fork in His hand. And He will thoroughly clear the threshing floor and throw away the chaff – those who lack the fruits of repentance.

But the grace of God goes before us! It's not by accident that you're here – as we often say to newcomers at the beginning of worship. John's message today, given to us by God, just like it was to those who came out to see him along the banks of the Jordan. And that we're able to repent is in itself – a work of grace within us. We hear the Word of God and come to understand that it requires a complete change of heart and mind. And while Jesus came to be our Savior for all so that He might deliver those who repent and turn away of their sins, it came at a great cost because He received our judgment on the cross. In doing so, all might be forgiven and have eternal life in Him and through Him.

We're prepared for His coming when repentance and forgiveness decorate our lives. John shares what this looks like to the tax collectors, soldiers, and crowds who were listening - whoever has two coats, share with the one who doesn't have one. Share your food with the one who doesn't have any. Deal honestly with others. Be content with your wages. They include deeds of love and kindness borne out of humble hearts, giving to others in need, and yielding to what God wants to see in all of our lives.

Today, we still have time to prepare. We have things to do. While the church might hang a couple of strands of lights on some of the trees outside, not everything is ready without repentance. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, *“the lack of repentance is the root cause of powerlessness in the church, in this materialistic, self-indulgent age. There can be no true spiritual power in a non-repentant church.”*

And so, we also take the time during this season to repent of our sins while we’re still able. And we remember that preparing for Jesus’s coming isn’t about buying Christmas presents, sending out Christmas cards, or putting up Christmas decorations. It’s about repentance! That’s what we need most in our lives. Repentant hearts that beautifully decorate our lives and make us ready to receive Him when He comes again.

It’s always nice to see the sanctuary with the poinsettias, the wreaths, and of course the Advent candles. While today marks the lighting of the second Advent candle, it means that Christmas is getting closer. The Advent season is almost halfway over with 20 more days until Christmas. This is a season we prepare, for Jesus’ coming once again. Will you be ready?

In Jesus’ name, Amen.