

9 December 2007
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Abounding in Hope”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

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

In the Collect of the Day we prayed earlier today, “*Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son . . .*” Who in their right mind would pray such a prayer? I mean, really! Some folks spend a lifetime burying things in their hearts. The anger, the frustrations, the lust, the jealousies, the hatred, the hurts and pains, the regrets, the betrayals – all that stuff from our past that we don’t want anyone else to know about . . . and that *we* don’t even want to remember. We tuck it deep in there. Bury it under a mountain of other things. And we put on a cheerful face. “*Yes, everything’s great! No problems at all,*” we say through our smiling, lying teeth. ‘Cause you know and I know it’s not like that. Inside. In our hearts. Where all that junk is buried and hiding, in the *hope* that one day it’ll just go away.

But it doesn’t, does it? Like that tiny bit of cancer your doctor told you was gone but then comes roaring back, like the weeds in your garden that you thought you finally got rid of but always seem to make a re-appearance, so it is with the sin in your heart isn’t it? Just when you think you got ‘em buried, under control, and conquered, they come roaring back to the surface. I know they do for me. And at the worst times, it seems. Often at holiday times. Our sinful nature is not so easily tamed. And besides that, satan knows they’re there, and he likes to give ‘em a jolt once in a while, to get ‘em going again. To ruin your day, your year, your life. To ruin your hope, and drive you to despair.

So why in the world would we pray for God to “stir up our hearts?”

Because the other way doesn’t work. When you try to deal with sin yourself, you find out who the real master is – and here’s a hint: it isn’t you. You can’t bury it. You can’t hide it. You can’t just forget about it. And you can’t kill it. It keeps coming back and ruining your life, often in new and unexpected ways! So what are

you going to do about it? There's only one thing left: confession. That's why we pray, "*Stir up our hearts, O Lord.*" That we confess the sin that we can't do anything about. That we confess the sin that enslaves us. That we confess and clean out all the junk that lives in our hearts. **That we confess, and let our Lord deal with it. For that is why He comes.**

And that is why He sends us John the Baptist. Every year in Advent, John comes in answer to our prayer. He comes to stir up our hearts and call us to repentance. He comes to point us to our Lord who is not just the baby in the manger, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) Who takes away *your* sin. The One who has come to give you **hope** - that your day, your year, your life, not be ruined. But that you live in Him. In His forgiveness. In His *new* life.

That's why John the Baptist was so wildly popular! Do you ever wonder about that? This guy just shows up out in the wilderness, wearing funny clothes, his breath wreaking of locusts and wild honey, looking like the guy you make sure you pass by on the *other* side of the street - and yet multitudes of people are going out to him! Why? *Because they're just like you and me.* They had all that junk in their hearts as well. They didn't need the Scribes and Pharisees biting them with the Law anymore; telling them what to do and not do; telling them to get better. They knew that! They knew the junk and the sin, just like you do. And they didn't need more rules and regulations - they couldn't keep what they had now! . . . No, they needed something else. Something different. They needed forgiveness.

And so they went to John. They streamed to him in the stream! And they confessed. All the junk. That it be forgiven in the washing of baptism. That what they could not deal with, be dealt with by God. To give them hope. Because otherwise, they knew that *the axe laid at the root of the tree* was pointed at them! They were *the chaff* that without the water of forgiveness, *the fire would soon consume.*

But *the kingdom of heaven was at hand* - God was coming to deal with the sin. Theirs, yours, and mine. The Lamb of God was coming to be the once and for all burnt offering on the altar of the cross, to atone for the sin of the world. To take the axe and fire we deserved, and provide for us His blood to wash us clean. That by dying and rising to life again, we who are dead with hearts filled with trespasses and sins might also rise to a new life with Him. A *new* life. A life of *forgiveness.* A life of *hope.*

That's what St. Paul - *who knew a thing or two about being filled with sin!* - that's what

St. Paul was also writing about in his letter to the Romans that we heard today, when he said: “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing . . .*” But believing in what? All that he had written about earlier in his letter! In the Lamb of God, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has come to rescue you from your sin. In His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sin. In His life from the dead that He now gives to you, that you live in *hope*, and not weighed down by the junk in your heart.

But then he writes more: “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace [the very things people are looking for!] – joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*” Did you hear that? *Abound* in hope. That’s no small glimmer of hope, or hope that’s just out on the horizon somewhere, but hope that lives in you even now! For you have been given the Spirit of our God, that you abound in hope, and so also in joy, and so also in peace. In a new life, at peace with God, and so at peace in your heart, and then at peace with one another. **And if at peace with one another, then doing those harmonious and good works that our Lord would have us do.** That others may have and know the peace we have been given. The peace we so desperately need. The peace that comes only in Christ.

So come, you who need peace. Come, all you with hearts weighed down and filled with sin. Come, from the wilderness to the oasis of our Lord. Where He washes you clean, where He robes you with His righteousness, and where He feeds you *not* with locusts and wild honey – but with His very body and blood. That joined to Him and He to you, you have the joy, peace, and hope that is so often spoken of this time of year, but seldom found. It is here for you, for *He* is here for you. Come. Confess. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

O come, Thou Branch of Jesse’s tree, Free [us!] from Satan’s tyranny
[Who] trust Thy mighty pow’r to save. And give [us] vict’ry o’er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel [Has] come to [us], O Israel!

(Lutheran Service Book #357, v. 4)

In the name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.