

5 December 2010
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Peace in Repentance”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13

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

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

That is the sum and substance of all John’s preaching. Something is happening, and John wants everyone to know it. To know, and to prepare. To **repent**.

For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

At hand, because in Jesus, God has begun to do His kingly deeds - His work of restoring all things. Of undoing the work of sin that has broken down the world. Undoing the work of sin that has ravaged you. So that once again, as Isaiah said:

***The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; . . .
The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
[So that] They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the
sea.***

And so John heralds the coming of this king and His work, ***that the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord.*** For this is the reason John is born, miraculously, to an old priest and his old barren wife. To do this work. To preach this Word.

And God’s power is at work in John’s preaching. How else to explain that people from far and wide, from ***“Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him.”*** To this guy dressed in smelly clothes and eating funny food. To this guy telling people *not* that they’re okay (which we like to hear), but that they’re not (which we don’t like so much to hear). To this guy who is no respecter of persons, who doesn’t care how educated or powerful or beautiful you

are, but treats all people - from Donald Trump to a street person - the same. God's power is at work in John's preaching, drawing people to the Word, and working in them through that Word. Working repentance, that they receive the gift of baptism.

The ones who don't are the ones who have not come to hear the Word of God, but to sit in judgment upon it. The Pharisees and Sadducees who thought they *were*, in fact, okay. Because they were children of Abraham, Jews, the chosen ones, people of the promise. Because they were the keepers of the Law. Be careful, John warns them, calling them **vipers**. That old viper-serpent satan knew God's Word and sat in judgment upon it, too. And so, John warns, be chopped down by the judgment of God's Word now, and in forgiveness grow to new life . . . or be chopped down by the judgment of God's Word in the end, and die.

So **repent**, John says, for yes, God is working in John's preaching and baptism, but **one mightier than John is coming**. Who will work even greater works. Who brings the kingdom of heaven to you. *He is coming* . . .

That preaching, that expectation - that the king is coming - is what makes this a perfect Advent text. For today, *it is* we who look for the king's coming. *It is* we who proclaim that the One born in the humble Bethlehem manger is coming again in glory. *It is* we who repent and are baptized.

But no, some would say, this is not the perfect text for this season, for the call of this season is PEACE, not REPENT. Thus say the many carols we hear and cards we receive. But John is here to teach us today that those two are really *the same call*. John takes this call for peace and shows us how: that to repent is the way of peace.

For what is it that keeps us from peace? You'll hear much talk of it in these last days of the year: threats of crime and scams; continued attempts at terrorism; your job or lack of one; pain and heartache in your life; family troubles; disease, death, old age; and countless other things, I'm sure. But what keeps you from peace is really none of these things. **Rather, it is unbelief**. The unbelief that lives in us that does not really believe that the kingdom of heaven is at hand; that does not really believe that God is greater than these things; that does not really believe that He is taking care of me. And this unbelief causes the things that rob us of peace: worry, anxiety, and fear.

So the peace-problem in the world is not: *if we could all just get along* . . . no, it is you. You are your own worst enemy. That's why John doesn't preach to nations, he preaches to you: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**.

But not only does John *preach* this - he *shows* you where this king and His kingdom are, where His work for you is. For he preaches not just anywhere; *he*

preaches at water.

For it is through water and the Word that God is doing His kingly deeds, His work of restoring those undone by sin, with the baptism of John.

It is to the water of the Jordan that the Word of God made flesh will come to begin His work of salvation, to be baptized with your baptism and take upon Himself all your sin and unbelief, to take it to the cross.

And it is through water and the Word that He has come to you today, to wash away your sin and give you new life.

And every time you heed the call of John to repent, it is to the Word and promise given to you in these baptismal waters that you return. And you are again washed with His forgiveness, again raised in His life, and renewed in His Spirit. For here the One greater than John has indeed baptized you with His Holy Spirit and worked His work, making you His child. And His child you are, really and truly.

And so God your Saviour loves you as His child. Yes, He is caring for you as His child. He is disciplining you as His child. He is providing for you as His child. And He will not stop. And if the sin in you causes you to doubt that, look no further than the cross - where He laid down His life for you; where He and His tree were chopped down that you might never be - *and see how much He loves you*. There is no trouble in this world greater than that love, no sin greater than His sacrifice, no death greater than the triumph of His resurrection.

For the one who was chopped down on the tree of the cross is alive again; and is Himself a *new tree of life*. Your Saviour is risen from the dead, and the good fruit of His cross *He now gives to you*. That eating His Body and drinking His Blood you be fed and filled with His forgiveness and life. And thus filled with Him, and abounding in His life and love, you produce the fruits of repentance, the fruits of new life, the fruits of Christ-like love and good works. *For you are what you eat*.

And you are this and do these things not in a world and life of peace that is trouble and worry free, but right in the midst of such a world - a world which needs Christ and needs you and your good works. And so your Saviour doesn't whisk you out of this world right when you believe, or insulate you from the troubles that others have - no, you have them, too. But He gives you His peace in the midst of this life, in the midst of the troubles, even in the midst of death. His peace which sustains you through them. His peace which is greater than them.

That is the gift many yearn to receive. The gift that Jesus has come, *and now comes*, to give. In truth, He is the only one who can. To repent is, therefore, to quit trying to get this peace yourself, to stop looking to yourself and what you can do, to turn away from yourself, and look to the one who comes to give you this peace. And with all the joy of Christmas morning, receive Him who comes to give such great

gifts to men. Who has come to give you Himself.

That was John's preaching then, and now. To prepare the way of the Lord. That ***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.***

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.