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

This is the season of hopes, wishes, and dreams. Of getting something for Christmas that you would like very much. Maybe it’s a thing, or the visit of a loved one, or a special time together. Some of these wishes, hopes, and dreams will be fulfilled and some will not. But one wish I hear more than any other - and it usually comes from older folks - is the wish that this year, this Christmas, will be like it used to be. Not so busy, not so filled with cares and concerns. Simpler. More joyful.

And so if I can just get things done sooner, then . . . Or if I can just simplify, then . . . If I can just avoid this person or this situation, that always gets me going . . . If I can just be more organized . . . then this year will be different. Like it used to be.

It usually doesn’t work, though. And not because you don’t try hard enough, or things always pop-up and get in the way, but because all those things are really not the problem. All that is treating the symptoms, not the problem. The problem with us is deeper. It’s not the stuff in our lives but the junk in our hearts. False gods that keep getting in the way. That I think will give me what I want, what I need. The false gods of a certain thing, or certain person, or Christmas a certain way. And it’s maybe junk that’s been there a long time, and that keeps dragging you down, and not only this time of the year . . .

Well a simpler, more joyful Christmas is what John the Baptist wants for you, too. And it’s why he was sent. Not to treat the symptoms in our lives, but the problem in our hearts. And his prescription is this: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Now, as a Christian (or at least as a Lutheran Christian), you hear that word a lot: repent. It’s an important word. But I want to take a moment to think about it a little more, since it has such a prominent place in John’s preaching to us this morning. I want to take a new look at an old word. And maybe get you to think about it a little differently. And maybe appreciate it a little more.

For the call to repent . . . well, it gets a bad rap. It feels like a wet blanket thrown over the Christmas joy that’s just ramping up this time of year. We don’t like all this talk about sin, we don’t like to be told we’re sinners, especially this time of the year - we’d like to
think about something else! Like joy and gifts and love.

But that’s exactly what John is preaching here. For he doesn’t just say: repent! He says: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And the kingdom of heaven is not a place, it’s where the King is. And where the King is, He is with His gifts for you. His gift of life. His gift of forgiveness. And with these, His gifts of joy and peace and love. And so John’s call here is not just about what you do, but what the King is doing; about what the King is giving. And John just wants you to receive His gifts. Gifts that . . . well, maybe . . . get lost or overshadowed . . . maybe especially this time of year . . . by gifts that look or seem bigger, better, and brighter.

So it’s really a battle, isn’t it? Which is actually what you would expect when there is a clash of kings. Which is why Herod tried to kill all the male babies in Bethlehem when he heard that a new king had been born. But it’s not that kind of battle. John doesn’t say “To arms!” as if the battle were for a kingdom of this world. He says “Repent!” for the battle is for you and your heart.

Now maybe you’ve heard before that the word repent means to change your mind or to change your life. And that’s not wrong. But even more and deeper, and what John is proclaiming, is to clean out your heart. To clean out the junk, the junk that maybe has been in there a long time, and that keeps dragging you down, and keeps Christmas from being that simpler, more joyful, time you so wish it could be again . . .

And so we prayed for that today. Stir up our hearts, O Lord, we prayed in the Collect of the Day. And right after this sermon we’ll sing: Create in me a clean heart, O God. For that’s where the problem is. Dr. John is getting right to the heart of the matter.

So the question is: who’s winning the battle in your heart? If you’re one of those wishing and hoping and dreaming of a better Christmas, a simpler and more joyful Christmas, a like-it-used-to-be Christmas . . . maybe that’s an indication . . .

And the other side fights well, this battle for your heart. They begin the fight sooner and sooner every year. Every year the gifts get a little bigger and the lights a little brighter. And they use our own weapons against us! Music that makes us wish for the like-it-used-to-be Christmas. Cards that speak of family, not Christ. Even Advent calendars that have replaced Scripture with chocolate. Not that you can’t have those things and enjoy those things - you can. They’re not wrong. But no wonder it’s so hard . . . so hard to break through . . . so hard to find that Christmas we want . . . so hard to set our hearts in the right place . . .

So notice where John is. In the wilderness. Away from the distractions. Where might that be for you? A place that you could, maybe just a little each day, get away for a little heart therapy? A little Word of God? To focus on the gift of a Saviour. On the gift of
forgiveness He has for you. And with that gift, the joy and love and peace you’re looking for. The joy and love and peace all that junk in your heart smotherers and all those false gods can’t give you. ‘Cause that’s the thing about false gods - all those people and things and thoughts and perfect Christmases - they can’t give us what they promise. Or if they do a little, it doesn’t last. Christmas comes and goes, the calendar turns to a new year, and the same ol’, same ol’ returns.

Those people in John’s day, too, had that problem. What do you think happened the day after they went out to John to repent and be baptized? After they went back home. Do you think their life magically got better and all their problems disappeared? Hardly. The work problems were still there, that annoying neighbor was still annoying, their own struggle with sin continued. Just repentance isn’t enough. We need something more . . . something - someone - mightier.

Which is exactly who John is pointing us to, and exactly who this season of Advent is pointing us to. The one mightier than us, the one mightier than John. The one who really can create in you a new heart, cleanse that heart, and give you the gift you need. The one mighty enough to be born as a helpless baby. The one mighty enough to hang on a cross. The one mighty enough not to just demand that we become like Him, but who became like us, to be mighty for us. The one mighty enough not to give us just one or two chances to get it right, but whose forgiveness never runs out. That you might have His love and joy and peace not just this time of year, but all year round.

And when that mighty one, Jesus, came, well, a lot of people didn’t care for His kind of might. They wanted a different kind of might, a more worldly kind of might, and so despised Him and the gifts He came to bring. And many today the same. And maybe even we can fall into that trap from time to time. Looking for worldly might, worldly wealth, worldly success, worldly victory, worldly gifts, worldly wisdom, worldly Christmases . . . instead of Him and His gifts.

So maybe we really do need that clean heart. Maybe we really could use a little repentance. Maybe His gifts are exactly what we need to have that simpler, more joyful Christmas. A little more of His Word. A little more of His feast. A little more of Him. And with more Him, more of His feast, and more of His Word, you will have more love and joy and peace. For not incidently, those are the first three fruits of the Spirit mentioned by St. Paul (Galatians 5).

And if that’s what you’re looking for, hoping for, dreaming of, only Jesus is the one who can give you what you need. The Jesus of the manger. The Jesus of the cross. The Jesus who became man to save man. The Jesus who bore your sin on the cross. The Jesus who died for you. The Jesus who rose from the dead for you. The Jesus who baptized you and now feeds you. The Jesus who speaks His forgiveness to you. The Jesus who came - and comes - to give Himself to you. That when He comes once more, one final time, in glory,
that will be a day of love and joy and peace for you, too. In fact, so much that it will be as Isaiah prophesied. A peace and harmony so great and full that the wolf will dwell with the lamb . . . the cow and the bear shall graze . . . cobras and adders pose no threat. For there is only peace. The way things were in the beginning.

So I guess that means the perfect Christmas? That is what Jesus has come to provide us after all! And it will one day be. So keep hoping for it! Hoping with repentance, and seeing how, even now, our Lord has begun this good work in you. That as St. Paul wrote, you live in harmony with one another, even now. And that the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. Believing not in what could be, but what IS, in Him, and what WILL BE, when He comes again. Not just a perfect Christmas, but a perfect forever.

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.