

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), C – Second Sunday in Advent, December 5th, 2021

Repentance and Baptism Go Hand and Hand,

Luke 3:1-14

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

The people had been waiting for this. Everyone was looking for the messianic kingdom. A whopping 400 years had passed since the LORD spoke through Malachi. God will send His messenger to prepare the way before Him. Ever since then: silence. And the silence of God is always threatening. If you think the silent treatment from your parents was bad. Imagine it from your Creator and Judge. Think of King Saul after he abandoned the words of the LORD. Saul faced vast armies and inquired of the LORD for help, but the narrator pens, **“the LORD did not answer him,”** and Saul’s kingdom was overcome. So if God was now silent just before Jesus’ day, did that mean God had abandoned His people? Many might have been tempted to think that. After all, take note of the names of the rulers from our Gospel text:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of *Tiberius Caesar*, *Pontius Pilate* being governor of Judea, *Herod* being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother *Philip* tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and *Lysanias* tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests.” On the one hand, these are just names. But to the Hebrew people, these names are as foreign and offensive to them as Chinese names in the White House would be to us. These are *Roman* rulers set over them. And before that, God’s people were ruled by Alexander the Great and the Greeks. And before that, the Persians. And before that, the Babylonians. The people in Roman Judea lived in a tremendously different world than the time of King David and Solomon reigning over a united Israel. If a Jew in Jesus’ day would think God had *utterly* abandoned them for their unfaithfulness, he’d have quite a bit of evidence.

And even though the temple was rebuilt when they returned from Babylon, everyone knew it paled in comparison to the glory of the prior temple, and besides, the central piece was missing: the Ark of the Covenant. Even more, instead of a great high priest from the line of Aaron, the position of high priest became a political office, split between Annas and Caiaphas. The status quo was bleak. The Israelites longed for a new son of David to rise up and overthrow the Romans and restore the glory days. But more than 400 years had passed since *any* of the prophets spoke *at all*...let alone the Messiah Himself. Did God abandon them? Or... was He just waiting for just the right time?

Malachi prophesied: **“Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me.”** And 400 years later, God remembered. God visited His people. The prophecy fulfilled. God hadn’t abandoned them. **“the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”**

Much can be said about this John the Baptizer. He is the forerunner to the long-promised Messiah. Jesus will say in our reading next week that no one else born of woman is greater. The one to prepare the way of the Lord. And how does John go about this task of making the Messiah’s paths straight? How does He fill in the valleys, bring every mountain and hill low, straighten the crooked places, and smooth the rough road? By preaching the message of repentance. The warning threat of hell should they continue to delight in their sin.

The voice arises in the wilderness. “Repent.” The voice goes up and down the Jordan river, where Israel first entered the promised land as God’s people. Repent. Return to the Lord. Turn away from trying to justify yourself. Let go of looking inside yourself for a pretend feeling

of righteousness, of being right with God. You're not righteous. There's only one who is righteous. Repent.

John's message is harsh. John's message isn't what someone today might call uplifting. This isn't what many might see as "missional" or good marketing to bring more people into the church. **"Brood of vipers."** Not exactly what you would say to your family when you welcome them into your home for Thanksgiving dinner. But John spoke the truth, the needed truth. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Change your ways. Your sin threatens you. Don't ignore your sin, but kill it. You live in darkness, and your father Abraham won't save you from being cut down and thrown into the fire. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Thus John's needful preaching then... and now.

"What shall we do then," the people ask. It's the million dollar question. We see it all over the New Testament. What shall you do? The answer is always the same: the will of God, whether it be to repent, and to believe after repentance. No matter if you are Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female, Christian, Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, or Muslim. What shall you do? The Ten Commandments. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. These commands apply all across humanity, and all of humanity is held accountable. The Christian difference, however, which is God's will for us to believe is that we're honest about our ability. You can't do it. You fail. You are weak. **<pause>** But that *doesn't* excuse you. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. John does not stutter. **"He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."** Attend to your vocation and your responsibilities. Fathers, be fathers. Mothers, be mothers. Tax collectors, collect no more than what is appointed for you to collect. Be content with what the Lord has provided you. And when you're done doing that, do more. You've never done enough and there's always more to

do. And don't for a second hold up all that you've done as a medal of achievement, that God should be pleased and grant you forgiven for the sake of your efforts, or that you've done all that you *could* do.

This voice in the wilderness is a voice *we* don't like. *We* don't *want* to be prepared for Jesus by first hearing the Law. We don't want John the Baptist and his harsh message. We don't want to be told that not only are we to follow every jot and tittle of God's Law, and that such a task is impossible, but we are to do it anyways. We like to be told that Christ is born, that Christ is risen, but we don't like the message that we are always in desperate need of Christ. We don't want to be told that we are always in desperate need of the Cross.

For in this cross you see that the will of God is more than the Ten Commandments. He also has willed that His Son descend from heaven, accomplish what is impossible to man but possible and *necessary* for the God-man to accomplish, to have the burdens of the entire world and this conundrum of the demand of absolute perfection laid on him. For Jesus stood in your place as John's baptism of repentance washed over him, and he assumed all of your filth into Himself. The ax that is laid to the root of the trees struck Jesus in your place and was then laid on the head of that dreadful serpent. The fire of God's wrath against your sins consumed Jesus on your behalf. His will is to return you to the Lord by saving you from your sins.

Prepare the way of the Lord. You must be emptied in order to be filled, and the Word of God both empties and fills. The evil one must be banished---in order to make room for the Holy Spirit. Flee from the devil, and the devil will flee from you. And be filled with the good fruit that comes down and lays underneath the tree of the cross.

John also prepares the way of Jesus by introducing us in the Bible to baptism, preparing the way of the Lord's Baptism. After all, baptism and repentance really do go hand in hand, even

if John's baptism otherwise differs from Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit. Living a life of repentance is living a life in Baptism. Repentance is not a one and done thing, but the very state of you who are at the same time saint and sinner. As Luther says in the first thesis of his famous 95 Theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." And remember that true repentance comes only by His Word, not by any special effort on your part apart from the Word. Hear and believe the harsh message that you are a great sinner. Hear and believe the sweet truth that you have a great Savior.

You are baptized. True repentance hears "do this," and despairs at your ability and sees that it's never done. True repentance hears "believe in this," and receives the grace of Christ who has done the work of justification already on your behalf. So suppress the old Adam, that your new heart grows ever stronger within you against the flesh that clings. If you're a Christian tax collector, collect no more than what is appointed---not in order to be saved, but because you *are* saved by God's mercy through Christ. If you're a Christian parent, bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord not because it wins you points with God, but because it's your duty. If you're a Christian child, obey your parents in the Lord, because it's your responsibility and what God wrote into this world for us to do in order to prosper.

The fruit of the tree is only good if the tree is good. The tree you cling to is the cross of Christ. Recognize your sin, receive your Savior. Bear good fruit. Prepare your heart for the Lord. He came then, He comes today, and He will come again on the Last Day. Prepare the way of the Lord. In the name of Jesus. Amen.