Second Sunday in Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

*Jesus calls us in baptism to “prepare the way of the Lord” by sharing the gospel.*

John the Baptist is probably one of the strangest characters in Holy Scripture. He is dressed in camel hair clothing, which I can’t imagine is comfortable, and he eats nothing but locusts and while honey. On top of that he is out in the wilderness preaching a message of repentance, calling people to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and warning that for those who do not obey and live the word of God there will be punishment.

John the Baptist certainly is strange perhaps harsh, and yet this is who God choses to prepare the way for Jesus the Savior to come. If he were here today preaching that same message how many of us would willingly listen? How many of us would simply write him off as nuts and move on?

What is amazing is that even though John the Baptist is preaching a message I imagine many of us would not consider hopeful, our Gospel reading from Matthew tells us that people received his message with faith and responded by going out in droves to be baptized by him.

In fact, so many people are responding to John the Baptists message that the Jewish religious leaders: the Pharisees and Sadducees are taking notice. Some of them even come to be baptized by John. We would expect John’s reaction to be one of joy that the religious leaders are coming to him, but his words are anything but welcoming to them.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Well what is this all about? Afterall presumably the Pharisees and Sadducees are coming to be baptized and receive the forgiveness of sins so they will be ready for the coming of the Messiah.

First, we need to remember that not all Pharisees and Sadducees were opposed to Jesus, his followers, and Jesus interpretation of the Jewish Law. Remember that Nikodemus was a Pharisee and he was a follower of Jesus, so we can’t assume the Pharisees and Sadducees are always the bad guys.

Second, for the author of Matthew who is writing to a Jewish Christian community God’s Law is very important. God’s Law and especially obeying and practicing it are the hallmarks of the followers of Jesus. It is in Matthew that Jesus will say that he has come not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. In turn Jesus followers, in response to God’s love, seek to follow God’s law.

What does this have to do with John the Baptist and his anger at the religious leaders coming to be baptized? It seems that some Pharisees and Sadducees mistakenly believe that being a descendent of Abraham is the get out of jail free card when it comes to confession, repentance, and obeying God.

In other words, it seems some of them believe that an ethnic ancestry with Abraham alone is enough to be the people of God. John the Baptist will have none of this and boldly declares that God could create children of Abraham from rocks so their ancestry will not spare them from repenting, seeking forgiveness, living how God desires God’s people to live.

Maybe this argument about ancestry providing a get out of jail free card sounds silly or foreign to us, but we do still have this kind of thinking in our culture or our churches.

Think of how sometimes when someone is in trouble for a crime, they will immediately talk about how their uncle is a top lawyer or their mother is a judge as if that will excuse their crime and punishment.

Think of how some people who are related to famous individuals try to use that to get privilege over others. Wouldn’t we be more interested in someone who is a direct descendent of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln before someone who was descended from poor farmers?

Even in churches this kind of thinking can happen. Biblical scholar Douglas Hare says that for Christians instead of “Abraham is our ancestor” becomes “Well we have Christ as our Savior” or perhaps for Lutherans it’s “well we are justified by Grace through faith so there.”

The truth is when we think this way, when we are looking for an easy get out of jail free card, we are not interested in listening to God but in trying to find our own way out using whatever we think will benefit our excuses.

Instead John’s message, which at first seems harsh, is one of healing and hope. It reminds us that no matter who are ancestors are we are all equally broken human beings in need of repentance, forgiveness, and God’s love.

John’s message reminds us that we are all deeply longing for the eternal peaceful Kingdom of God described by the Prophet Isaiah. A Kingdom where there is no violence, no war, no famine, no death. A Kingdom where wolves don’t kill lambs but sleep and eat together with them. A Kingdom where even children and poisonous snakes can play together.

That Kingdom has already begun to form in our world because of the one who John the Baptist was called to prepare for: Jesus Christ the Son of God our Savior.

If we think like some of the Pharisees and Sadducees did that we don’t need to repent or that because of some imagined privilege, we are superior to others than we risk missing Jesus. If we deny our broken human nature than we risk missing the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

We risk missing the good news that Jesus loves us in our brokenness and Jesus knows we can’t fix things or earn a relationship with God by some imagine privilege or merit so instead Jesus came into our world to create a way for us.

God come down from heaven to be born into our world to save us from our sins because we can’t do it on our own. God came down and became a vulnerable baby through the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit and was given the name Jesus. In that moment the Kingdom of God began. Jesus then spent his life preaching about God’s Kingdom and welcoming all to come repent and be welcomed into the Kingdom.

When the time came Jesus went willingly to die alone on the cross so that by his death forgiveness would be available to everyone, and for all who believe they are given a new relationship with God.

In rising from the dead Jesus conquered even the force of death and brought the hope and promise of a bodily resurrection and eternal life to come in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus still calls people by the Holy Spirit to repentance, to admit we need God, and that we need healing, and so in the sacrament of Holy Baptism Jesus gives us what we need. We receive forgiveness from Sin, a new life to live for the sake of the world, the promise of the bodily resurrection, and we are joined with all the baptized before us in the body of Christ: the church.

This is the story that are called by Jesus to share with the world. We are called like John the Baptist before us to prepare the way for Jesus return by telling people who Jesus is, that he loves them in their human brokenness, he values us no matter what we have done, that he calls us to admit our brokenness and daily remember the gift of Baptism he has given us for the forgiveness of sin and to join us to his family, who have a share with him in the Kingdom of God. Amen.