

Sermon Advent 2A 2019

December 8, 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

Paul's words in the letter to the Romans this morning should hopefully be words of comfort for you. Hear what he says there again, **"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."** He's saying the God has graced us with these words of Scripture, He's inspired the authors, giving them the words that through their writings we might receive endurance, we might receive encouragement, and in all of this we would have hope.

Now, hope is a word we throw around a lot. We hope that the Cubs might do enough in the offseason to make another run at the series. I hope that the Colts can have the fortune of finding a quarterback that will carry them to Super Bowl again. Or maybe more importantly, perhaps you hope that your pains and sorrows will go away, or your broken relationships might be mended. These are all forms of hope; some more relating to the faith and others less. But there they are. But when Paul speaks of hope, he has something different in mind, doesn't he? What's Paul thinking about? Sure he might be thinking about things like the pains and sorrows going away, and the mending of broken relationships, but what's all of that encapsulated under? The hope in Christ. The hope that this world is not all there is, and that the sin that has ruined it has been overcome in the life of Christ. In other words, the hope he describes is in our Lord. It's in the promise of the resurrection of Jesus and the joy of the eternal life we have with Him. As much as the world would like to have us looking at "more important," or "more practical," or "more real" things, this is Paul's hope. And it should be ours as well.

But then we have John in the Gospel Lesson. What's John talking about? There he is out there, with his crazy clothes and his crazy diet, and I picture him having crazy hair and maybe even eyes too. But there John is out there in the wilderness, and what's he preaching? He's preaching his fire and brimstone, isn't he? He's out there preaching about the judgment, the ax at the root of the tree, the chaff separated from the wheat and thrown in the fire, the unquenchable fire. There he is with a message

that sounds like the opposite of hope. And what does that message boil down to? One word: repent. **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** So why does he preach this repentance? Why does he preach this fire and brimstone? How do we reconcile this message with Paul’s call for hope?

We reconcile it by understanding that unrepentance destroys hope. Unrepentance destroys hope. As we say that, though, we all know this call to repentance isn’t popular. In reality, it never has been. Look at the reaction to John. The Pharisees come out to see him as a spectacle. Or look at the time of Luther, it wasn’t “repent” it was “do penance.” Luther discovered what the word really said, that it wasn’t something that we were to do, it was an attitude God creates in us. And in our day, it’s the same. It’s just as unpopular as ever.

For example I was reading that the author to the popular book “Seven Habits for Highly Effective People” found that the issue he wanted to address stems from a difference between what he calls a “character ethic” versus a “personality ethic.” He said that the “character ethic” is focused on one’s own virtue, one’s emphasis on doing what is moral, what is right, what should be done. Whereas, the “personality ethic” is focused on one’s own view of themselves as that translates to their presentation before others, how people view them, how their “PR” persona appears. He makes the point that the “personality ethic” is the air we breathe. We don’t even realize it, but that’s what we focus on: how we might appear, deriving our improvement in that from how we think about ourselves. So we’ve undermined this idea of repentance with one focused on how we feel about ourselves and how that carries over to what others think.

So, obviously, this isn’t the natural state of our brain to think this way, to understand that unrepentance undermines hope, but why is that? Why is this so unpopular? Well on a human level it’s because it hurts our ego. In fact, it even makes others feel bad for us when we confess our own unrepentance. In my class that I taught this semester, I had a student write in their paper that they disagreed with me speaking of myself as not being a good person. Their thought was that they could see me doing good in the world and they wanted, in a way, to tell me that I’m OK.

You see, there’s this way where repentance strikes us in that ego, in that level of our identity that’s bothersome. This student either out of concern for me or perhaps out of a reflection for the implication for themselves didn’t want to acknowledge how

this affects us. But yet, what do we see here with John? He strikes the Pharisees right in the heart! **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”** Brood of vipers! What a way to attack someone’s heritage, right? And more so: **“Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.**

Here the Pharisees saw their identity in their heritage, their genealogy from Abraham. They were good Jews! Good Hebrews in the lineage of their father Abraham! But it doesn’t matter before God. And we ought to hear the same, “don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘we’re good Lutherans!’” If you know me you know that I value being Lutheran a great deal. But this isn’t because of Luther, or the name, it’s because of the teaching. This is the faithful teaching, by God’s grace. And so let our identity not be in our name, or traditions as Lutherans, but in Scripture, as we confess in what really makes a Lutheran properly so. And as I say that, perhaps you feel that strike to your ego. That’s why this isn’t popular.

Then it gets worse: **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** Our unrepentance says this hurts too. The thought that God would be so angry to cast people to hell. The thought that our own sin could be that bad. Honestly, this is crushing, isn’t it? When you hear that and think about it? Doesn’t it pierce you?

So, why the harshness? Because unrepentance destroys hope. How so? Because our unrepentance shows that we don’t think our sin is that serious. Our inclination to cringe at the conviction of God’s Law shows that we don’t like to admit how we deserve the axe at our root, how we ought to understand ourselves in view of that chaff that we are without this King whose coming John the Baptist is foretelling.

I looked at my sermon from three years ago to see what I said about this, and I was reminded of a story in that sermon that I told about Luther’s life. You see Luther had an extremely sensitive conscience. When he went to confession before understanding God’s grace in the Gospel, he would spend hours on end remembering all of the sins he committed so they could be named for penance. Eventually his father confessor, a man named Staupitz found that he had to speak the gospel to Luther. And Staupitz made it clear: Luther thought his sins were “painted” sins, they were only

superficial, and so Christ is a “painted” savior—only there to help us along in getting better. But the truth is that our sins are real sins, and thus Christ is a real savior.

As we rail against repentance—and we all do to some extent or another. We all try to still justify ourselves. As we do that we either think that our sin is painted and superficial enough we don’t really have need for a savior, or we think that Christ’s sacrifice couldn’t be that deep in its effect. And so in unrepentance we cling to this old identity, this old ego that we have.

But Christians, that unrepentance destroys hope. That clinging to the old identity is the opposite of what we need to do. In human terms, sure it seems that if we just build ourselves up, our self-esteem, our self-worth, our self-confidence, then we’ll conquer the world. But the hope of Scripture is not in us. Think about it what Jesus says: blessed are the poor in spirit. In repentance we see poverty in spirit and that makes clear the path. It’s like Isaiah said, **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”**

In that we see the real hope. Yes there is this threat that scares us, but the One who comes bears all of that for us. When we see by His grace, by the revelation of His Word, that this is the reality, this is the real comfort for us. This is our promise, the One who will come with that winnowing fork made Himself chaff to suffer condemnation in our place, and when we give up our identity and our self-esteem we find something far greater. When we crucify the identity on His cross, we find a new identity in the righteous image of Jesus given to us. The image that flows from His resurrection and life. We find the esteem and the worth of the One who sees us as worth giving up heaven for.

Think about that. That is real hope when you feel worthless. The God of the universe bespeaks worth to you. He sees you as having the worth of giving up His life for. This is the hope that Paul speaks about. This is the hope that unrepentance destroys. But this is the hope that repentance clings to. In view of that hope, then, **May 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.** Amen