

Second Sunday in Advent – December 8, 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” 4 John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The old saying goes that there are only two seasons in Minnesota—winter and road construction. If you’re not so happy that winter is now here, at least you can find consolation that various road construction projects have wrapped up. While many do enjoy winter, not too many enjoy dealing with road construction projects. From road resurfacing to the new curbs and sidewalks we had around town this year to the opening of the new Eisenhower bridge, projects can range from the simple resurfacing jobs to the bigger deep down digging and rerouting of roads. All of these are needed to maintain our systems of streets and highways. In our text for this morning Matthew quotes Isaiah prophesying of John the Baptist: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him” (v. 3). John had not come to talk about road construction, but to prepare the way for Jesus’ coming. In this season of Advent we too are preparing for the Lord’s coming with a project that is more than a simple cosmetic resurfacing. **“Prepare the Way for the Lord.”** First, **with repentance** and second, **with preaching**.

Verses 1 & 2: “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” John’s message to the people was simple – repent because the Savior is coming. Why was repentance a necessary part of this preparing the way for the Lord? Repentance is about being sorry for sin—taking an honest look at one’s thoughts, words and actions and admitting guilt for the times of failure. This was important because Jesus was coming to win forgiveness for those sins. If they didn’t see that they were sinners, they would not see any need for Jesus in their lives.

John was drawing crowds from all around the area (v. 5) and so this brought the Pharisees and Sadducees out as well. John had a special message for these religious leaders: In verse 7 he called them a “brood of vipers.” He pulled no punches with them, basically calling them offspring of the devil. Like the devil, who had taken the form of a snake to deceive Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, they were deceiving others about who they were. They were good at pointing out how well they lived their lives and that there really wasn’t any need for

repentance on their part. On top of that they were even physical descendants of Abraham (v. 9), so they really didn't need a Savior. They were doing just fine on their own.

John's message was simple to them as well: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8). Repentance is not just about being sorry for sin, but then also producing fruit and changing one's ways. It's not just a cosmetic resurfacing, but a deep down change on the inside. If they comforted themselves with the knowledge that a little sin wouldn't matter because of how good they were overall, the judgment was clear: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (v. 10).

John's simple message is the same for us: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." In Advent we are preparing to celebrate and remember Christ's first coming at Christmas, but that happened two thousand years ago. Now what is near is his second coming, whether that means on the Last Day of this world or on the day of our death. To prepare for that end, the message is still repent. We acknowledge our sinfulness and turn to God asking for forgiveness, which is all made possible by the baby born in Bethlehem.

But there is a bit of Pharisee and Sadducee in each of us. Our repentance lacks a sense of urgency. We hear about repentance all the time, we speak the confession of sins at the beginning of most of our services, but we think that overall we're pretty good people. We go to church and we read our Bibles. We may attend a Bible class or help out with a service activity. We don't sin nearly as much as the world around us, just watching or reading the news can bring out the Pharisee in all of us. On top of that, it's in our heritage too. We've been a member of the church all of our lives. Our parents and grandparents were members too. We're doing just fine on our own. When we fall into these temptations and lose that urgency in our repentance, we become nothing more than a brood of vipers. Our preparations become nothing more than cosmetic resurfacing rather than dealing with the crooked problems underneath.

So to straighten our path, to tear out the old and put in the new, we repent. We will never be good enough as long as we have our sinful nature. And so this repentance will need to be repeated on a daily basis as we examine our sinful thoughts, words and actions. Do we expose ourselves to sinful actions and thoughts with our choices in music, TV, movies, magazines or internet sites? Do we gossip about others and cut them down behind their backs? Do we let our church attendance or bible study start to slip? Do we hate, steal, lie, cheat, lust, or covet? As we take an honest look at ourselves we see our sin and our need for a Savior. Jesus' first coming was all about living and dying in our place so that our many sins could be forgiven. Repentance also means change, producing, not rotten fruit, but healthy and wholesome fruit. To help us in this, Jesus comes to us in another way—through Word and Sacrament. We receive forgiveness through the Bible, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Through them we receive the power to produce good fruit in our lives. These are the preparations we make for the Lord, not just in Advent, but on every day of our lives.

Verse 4 gives a description of John the Baptist: "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." John had a different lifestyle than his fellow countrymen, living out in the desert with simple clothes and food. But his ministry was not about him, he was simply God's messenger. Verse 11: "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." His message pointed to Jesus. The Holy Spirit was using his preaching to bring others to the truth of the gospel.

As we prepare the way for the Lord, it's not just about ourselves, it's also about those around us. We do not cut ourselves off from the world to avoid any hint of sin or the temptations of this world. We have a responsibility to our friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to prepare them for the way of the Lord with our preaching. Are we pointing to Jesus whether in our speaking or lifestyle? Do people see us as different because we are Christians?

This is not suggesting we all run out to buy the latest fashions in camel's hair and leather or stock up our pantries with locusts and honey. So what makes us different than those around us? When it comes to managing our time, does time with God and his Word take priority over everything else? When it comes to managing our skills and abilities, are we putting others' needs, especially their spiritual needs, ahead of our own? When it comes to our money, are we spending to build up God's kingdom rather than our own? When it comes to our conversations, do we point to Jesus when things are going well because he has blessed us? Do we point to Jesus when things are not going well because he is still in charge to take care of us? All of these things are the goals that we aim for in our preaching, but at the same time that's why we have repentance. We will never be perfect in this preaching, but we will continue to prepare the way for the Lord so that others can join us in the kingdom of heaven. This is all made possible through God as Paul summarized in Romans 15(:5-6): "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In road construction, all of the various projects are done to ensure the safety of those who are traveling. As we prepare the way for the Lord, the same is true. For our eternal safety we prepare with repentance as we confess our sins and see our need for our Savior who has won our forgiveness. This is an ongoing process as we continue to serve the Lord in our lives. Through our preaching, both in word and action, we are helping to prepare the way for others, so that the Holy Spirit can bring them safely into his kingdom. May the Lord continue to give us the endurance and encouragement for this task. Amen.