

Second Sunday of Advent – December 8, 2013
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 3:1-12 Second Sunday in Advent

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, '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 comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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."**

In the name of our coming Lord, my friends:

During this time of year one has to be a bit on guard for fraudulent calls and emails asking us for financial information. They may tell you that they need the information so that you can continue to have access to your funds or so that they can lower your interest rate or for some other seemingly legitimate reason. You have to be careful to whom you listen – and of course it's never a good idea to give out personal and financial information to someone whom you did not contact first.

Scam artists are nothing new. There have been scam artists who try to steal people's money in the past and there will no doubt be new scams in the future. There are also religious scam artists – individuals who attempt to rob us of the blessings that God has in store for us with there false teachings. You have to be careful to whom you listen.

Today's sermon text gives us the opportunity to

Theme: Listen to a True Advent Messenger

1. A Messenger promised and sent by God
2. A Messenger proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Jesus name
3. A Messenger with a warning of impending judgment

Our Advent preacher for today is none other than John the Baptist – a messenger promised and sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah – the one who would take away the sins of the world.

John is introduced rather suddenly by Matthew – the end of chapter two concluded with the account of Jesus return to Nazareth from Egypt when he was a young child. Chapter three begins with an event that took place about 30 years later: **In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea.** Although his arrival seems somewhat sudden as we read Matthew's Gospel it's something that those who are familiar with other Gospel accounts would have anticipated. The Gospel of Luke begins with the account of an angel making the announcement of John's birth to his aged father, Zechariah. The angel told Zechariah: **He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with**

the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:15-17 NIV)

But even before this the Lord had announced his coming. The Lord spoke of him through the prophet Malachi who wrote: **"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me..." says the Lord Almighty.** (Malachi 3:1) The prophet Isaiah wrote of one who would cry out in the desert. **A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.** (Isaiah 40:3) Matthew who uses the OT prophecies to prove that Jesus truly is the Messiah refers to this passage as not only to assure us that John is a true Advent preacher promised and sent by the Lord but also to assure us that the one he pointed to was really the Messiah foretold by the prophets and promised by the Lord.

We have a threefold testimony to the fact that John is one promised and sent by the Lord. Matthew's writing is inspired by the Lord – it speaks divine truth. John himself understood that he was the one sent to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. When Jews from Jerusalem sent a delegation asking who he was (John 1:23) **23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "** And Jesus also spoke of John as one who had been sent to prepare for his coming: (Matthew 11:10) **This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'**

So we can be convinced that John is a true Advent messenger – one promised and sent by the Lord. It was in keeping with the Lord's will and promise that John conducted his work in the a somewhat remote area between Jerusalem toward the Jordan River and the Dead Sea which Matthew refers to as the desert of Judea. It was actually a hilly region with small villages scattered throughout the area. Because of its hilly nature it was not fit for allowing sheep and flocks to graze but there were occasional patches of crops, trees and even some olive groves.

It was in this area that the OT prophet Elijah had made his last appearance. And interestingly enough John is clothed in similar fashion to Elijah – in 2 Kings 1:8 Elijah is described as **"a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist."** Our text tells us that **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's clothing identified him as a prophet reminding the people that his message and not the man was what was important. He began his work in the less populated areas, apart from the population centers, the synagogues and the temple – an indication that his was a different message than what was commonly taught by the religious teachers of the day – whom John and Jesus might have called "religious scam artists" if the term had been common in their time. John would bring life and rejoicing to this remote area by pointing the people to their Savior: **The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.** (Isaiah 35:1)

It didn't take long before word of John, his baptisms and his preaching spread. **People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.** Even many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to where he was baptizing.

No matter who it was that came to him John's message was the same. He was a true advent messenger sent by God – **A Messenger proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Jesus name.** Our text says that **John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2) and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."**

John came as a herald – announcing the good news that the kingdom of heaven was near because the promised Savior was near. His message was intended to prepare people for the coming of their Savior. The heart of that message is characterized by a single Greek word, **μετανοείτε**, which speaks of a change of mind and heart, of perceiving things differently, a complete change of direction. That's what should come to mind when we speak of repenting and repentance. The change may include sorrow but it's so much more than that. The change however is not something that we can bring about by ourselves. Repentance which in this situation includes turning away from sin and turning to Christ in faith is always a miracle. Such repentance is produced by the working of the Holy Spirit. It's a response to the word of God. Although it takes place inwardly it shows itself outwardly. Changed hearts mean changed lives. John called attention to that fact when he admonished the Pharisees and Sadducees to produce fruits of repentance.

Together with his call for a change of heart, John also announced forgiveness to those who confessed their sins. **Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.** John explained his baptism in this way as he pointed away from himself and to the Savior: **"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

John's baptism was similar to the baptisms that we are familiar with. It was a means used by the Holy Spirit to bring people to repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit moves people to confess and to find forgiveness. The application of water on the outside pictures the washing away of the guilt of sin and the beginning of a fresh new life. Jesus the one who John pointed to was the one who stood behind John's baptism. And Jesus stands behind our baptisms. Those who are baptized receive forgiveness and salvation through the working of the Holy Spirit and the power of the word associated with the water. John understands that as he speaks of Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit. John also says that Jesus will baptize with fire. It's Jesus who kindles the fire of faith in our hearts – his word purifies our hearts from sin – just as fire purifies gold and silver.

To those who confessed their sins John pointed them to Jesus and his forgiveness. He was a true Advent messenger proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Jesus name. But he was also A Messenger with a warning of impending judgment for those who refused to acknowledge their sins and to repent. That was the case when the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to see him. **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?"**

Both of these religious groups took pride in the law of God. The Pharisees put great stress on the outward acts commanded by the law – even if their hearts weren't interested in keeping it. Although the Sadducees were free thinkers and religious skeptics they were like the Pharisees because both groups thought that they were entitled to God's blessings because of what they had done or because of who they were.

John understood the unbelieving hearts of these men – they had not come seeking forgiveness. They had no repentance. Just how John knew this we are not told. It may been their proud boasting in themselves that was his clue or it may have been that the Holy Spirit revealed it to him in some way. One thing is clear. John minced no words when he spoke to them. By calling them a brood of snakes or vipers he's really calling them children of the devil who used a snake to bring sin into the world. They were every bit as deceitful as he was – they were pretending to be believers but as Jesus would say: (Matthew 15:8-9) **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."**

Because of their unbelief the coming of Jesus would bring wrath and judgment. **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.

Repentance bears fruit. One of the fruits of repentance is an honest confession of sin. Another is depending on the forgiving grace of God. There was no evidence of that here. There was no confession of sin, no confession of faith. These men took an open stand against the Lord and his salvation as they sought to earn heaven by their own works. And no amount of boasting about their connection to Abraham, who believed the Lord and who was credited with righteousness (cf. Genesis 15:6), would change their status before the Lord. Their judgment was near – the ax was at the root of the trees but there still was time but they would not listen and so to them John spoke of Jesus in this way: **“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.”**

John had a complete understanding of Jesus’ work – he is both the Savior of all and the Judge of all. When he comes again he will separate believers and unbelievers as a farmer separates the good fruit from the bad, the useful part of the grain from the husk and the stalk.

As a true Advent Messenger, John points us to Jesus and his saving work. All John’s words ring true today including his warnings of impending Judgment. His warning serves to remind us not to rely on our own works, not to reject the call to repentance and faith. When we ponder what Jesus saved us from we will have a real appreciation for what he gained for us on the cross. He came and saved us from the eternal fires of hell. He came and saved us for the eternal joys of heaven. He comes to us today through his word and sacrament calling us to faith and strengthening our faith, enabling us to bring forth fruits of repentance. And when he comes again he will take us and all who believe in him to the glories of heaven – because we have been declared righteous for his sake. Dear friends this is the message of a true Advent Messenger – one sent and promised by God. You can depend on it and rely on it. You can say Amen to it – that is, Yes I believe it. Amen.