

“Repent!”

Matthew 3:1-12

December 8, 2013

2nd Sunday in Advent

Some words of Advent may be seen as positive and they make us happy. Last week’s word is a good example: Hosanna! Save now! We all like salvation. Other words, especially those pertaining to Jesus’ first coming are the same: hope, joy, peace, and so on. Today’s word is not like that at all. It is a word which may offend us and make us angry. It is a word that can be used by some as a club to beat people over their heads with guilt. Others will dismiss this word as a quaint remnant of “fire and brimstone” preaching from the past. Today’s word is the message of John the Baptist: Repent!

Many people will see this word as being unnecessary, at least for themselves. They don’t need to repent. While they may make some mistakes or inappropriate choices, none of those things are repent-worthy. Repentance is something for “those” people to do – unbelievers and those who are worse sinners than me. Others will say that they don’t need to hear about repentance because it is something they are already doing. They will say, “When I do something bad, I feel bad and I say I’m sorry. I speak the confession of sin every Sunday in church whenever I come. I’m good to go.”

Not so fast! In our text, John the Baptist is not preaching to “those people”. He is not calling pagans to repentance. John is in Judea and is preaching to God’s people who have come out from Jerusalem, from all of Judea, and from the region around the Jordan River. This was a message that was highly offensive to the Jews at that time who felt that they had no reason to repent. They were the chosen people – life-long Jews. What did *they* need repentance for?

John’s message of repentance was not only offensive, but was also far reaching. The word, “repent”, means much more than feeling sorry for your sins. It is a total and complete change of heart, mind, and soul. In our modern day usage, we have turned repentance into a mere feeling of being sorry. It is far more serious than that. Some have suggested that John’s message of “Repent,

for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” should be understood as “Be converted because the reign and rule of heaven has come near and is staring you in the face!”

This should give us some cause to pause. If God would send John the Baptist to His people with this message in the 1st century, what makes us think we do not need this message as God’s people in the 21st century? We could try all the excuses they might have used back then.

“Well, we believe in God.” They would say the same thing. “But we are very religious. We come to church as often as we can.” When the most religious people of their day – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – showed up out of curiosity (not thinking that they needed to repent, of course), John called them, “You brood of vipers!” (You offspring of poisonous snakes!)

We could play our trump card and say, “I have been confirmed. I am a life-long Lutheran and long time member of this church!” They didn’t even get a chance to try something similar with John. He cut them off before they could do it. He said, “And 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.”

Your personal piety will not help you before God. Whether it is a pastor who thinks he is pious because of his calling or any layman who thinks he or she is pious because they come to church often, it does not impress God. Your church attendance, your offering total, and your record of service will make no difference with God.

Your spiritual pedigree will not make a difference, either. If we place our confidence in our confirmation or in our status as Lutherans, we are in as much trouble as the Jews were at John’s time. To paraphrase John speaking to us, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have been confirmed’ or ‘We have Martin Luther as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up confirmed Lutherans.’”

Should we be offended or should we listen? John warns those who do not repent or those who merely say that they repent without producing fruit in keeping with repentance (a life that shows that true repentance has taken place) that God’s wrath is coming. Like trees that do not produce good

fruit, unrepentant sinners (regardless of their outward religious affiliation) will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

John said the kingdom of heaven was at hand. He meant that the reign and rule of God was about to burst on the scene. He apparently believed that God's wrath and judgment were about to take place.

John was right that the kingdom of heaven was at hand and that God's reign and rule was about to take place. However, it would not take place in wrath and judgment, but in love and mercy. When I was a kid, I always connected John the Baptist with the birth of Jesus because we always heard about John right before Christmas in Advent (like we do now). However, by the time of John's ministry, the Baby born in Bethlehem had already grown up. Jesus was about to appear, not in being born, but in beginning His public ministry. In Him was hope and help for sinners needing repentance.

Jesus came, not because people were good, but because they – we – were bad. He came not to call those who thought they were righteous, but those who knew they were sinners. He came as a physician, not to help those who felt they were well, but those who experienced the disease of sin and all of its consequences.

But Jesus did more than preach and teach God's love and mercy. Jesus came to impart God's love and mercy, not His wrath and judgment. Jesus came to save people, rather than to judge sinners. Jesus suffered God's wrath against sin on the cross instead of letting sinners experience that wrath. Jesus died to gain forgiveness for all sinners of all time rather killing sinners as we deserved. Jesus came back from death to life again so that forgiven sinners could pass from death to life in heaven rather than to death in hell forever.

The repentance needed to turn from our sin and the faith needed to receive forgiveness for it are gifts which God has given to us and worked in us. We have done ourselves a disservice if we think that repentance means we have to struggle to feel really really bad and really really guilty about our sin. It's not about us and our feelings. It's all about God and His actions. The Bible says (Acts

11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25) that repentance is something that God grants us out of His kindness (Romans 2:4) Our text for today shows us how that gift is freely given.

John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance.” In Holy Baptism, God granted us repentance. In other words, He converted us. He washed away our sins and created faith in our hearts to receive the forgiveness Jesus earned for us on the cross. He created a new life within us with the same power by which He raised Jesus from the dead. God has turned us around (which is what repentance means – a total and complete change of heart, mind, and soul) and set us on a new path that leads to everlasting life.

Baptism is more than a one-time event in our distant past. Baptism is something that affects and directs our every day lives. As Christians, repentance simply means that we live in our baptism. Our text says, “[the people] were baptized by [John], confessing their sins.” We assemble here every Sunday and begin at the baptismal font, hearing the words spoken over us at our baptism, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And what do we do next? We confess our sins. We are forgiven anew.

In a sense, we can say that we are re-converted every week (yes, even every day). That was Luther’s understanding. In the Small Catechism, Luther said, “The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” We don’t have to rely on our piety, our pedigree, or anything we do to be converted or stay converted. It is God who has granted us repentance and new life. It is God who, by His Word, keeps us in repentance and strengthens us for that new life. We leave here every Sunday to bear fruit in keeping with that repentance. In our new life, it will not be something we “have to” do, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us, it will be something we will naturally do according to our new nature in Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand once again. As Jesus was about to come to the people of John’s time in mercy and love, He is about to come again to us in judgment and fire. John’s call of

repentance is for us as it was for them. Jesus is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire – with faith and with judgment. Hold on to your baptism and the conversion and new life it gives you by the working of the Holy Spirit. Hear the Word of God so that you might not be deceived or lured into a sense of false complacency by the devil, but remain strong in the faith given you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Living in repentance and faith means the fire of God's judgment will not touch you. Instead, you will be the wheat gathered into His barn while the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire. So, you see, repent is not a bad word that need upset us or offend us. When understood properly, it is a word that ultimately leads to forgiveness, life, and salvation. And all of that is good – very good. Amen.