

"Is Everyone All Right?"
Matthew 3:1-12

December 4, 2016

2nd Sunday of Advent

Published in 1969, the book, *I'm OK – You're OK*, became a very popular self-help book. Although, perhaps not intending to do so, this book (or, at least, the title) seemed to establish our method of evaluating ourselves and others. I'm okay. You're okay. We're all okay. In the past nearly 50 years, our view of ourselves has gotten even higher. We are now more than simply "okay". We are very good. To criticize or correct any one is to commit the worst possible sin in society today: being judgmental.

It is no wonder then that the message of repentance is not very popular, especially during the time of Advent, the happy and positive time right before Christmas. When John the Baptist appears on the scene, preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," it implied that something is not okay; that something is wrong and needs to change. Maybe I'm not okay. Maybe you're not okay. Maybe we're all not okay. Maybe something needs to be done.

What exactly is repentance anyway? For many people, it means "be sorry over" or "to regret" something which is happened in the past. In this scenario, repentance has nothing to do with the future. You don't really have to change anything. Just regret you did them or feel sorry, either that you did them or that you got caught doing them.

But that's not the biblical concept of repentance. Repentance is more than feeling bad and trying to do better. According to the Greek word used in the New Testament, repentance involves a complete and total change of mind and heart. There is a change from sin and unbelief to faith and good works.

Now, we might concede that repentance is something helpful for a person who does a great number of sins or does really bad sins. Repentance is certainly something useful for an unbeliever. But what does repentance have to do with us – good and faithful believers? We would prefer to stick with "repentance light": feeling really bad about doing wrong, mumbling, "I'm sorry", and trying to do better the next time.

In comes John the Baptist to burst our bubble. He cries out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. John's message needs to be taken seriously. God is about to take action. The rule and reign of the Lord is about to begin. Jesus is about to begin his ministry – a ministry that will lead him to the cross. John speaks to fulfill prophecy. He is "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." Repentance is the proper preparation for the Lord to come.

But John is not speaking to really bad sinners. He's not speaking to unbelievers. John is speaking to all of Israel, the very people of God. This would've been very shocking for Israel to hear. The people of Israel were very comfortable and secure in their status as the people of God. Yet John calls *them* to turn from unbelief and sin to faith and good works. In fact, they had so thoroughly messed things up that John calls them to cross the Jordan River (essentially leaving the Promised Land), come back through the water of the Jordan River in baptism, re-enter the land, and start all over again new.

Why the call for such drastic action? Some thought that the mere performance of religious rituals would preclude their need for true repentance. When John saw the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming out for baptism, he yelled, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, don't just be religious and talk about repentance, but actually show the results of repentance in your lives by how you live.

Others likely thought that their ethnicity might make them right with God. John anticipated this and said, "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father.'" In other words, don't think that your membership in a certain group (in this case, the nation of Israel) makes you right with God.

Still others thought they could talk about repentance without any corresponding change in behavior. This is like planting an apple tree and not getting any apples. The farmer plants, nourishes, and cares for the tree without the tree's help. Yet, as a result of the farmer's work, apples are expected. Any tree that does not produce apples will eventually be cut down. In the same way, God had chosen Israel out of grace. He had planted them as trees in his orchard. And God had expected the fruit of faith and of changed behavior. But many people were not changing at all. So, John warns, "Even now the ax 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."

John speaks to us today. He says to us, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." God is about to take action. The rule and reign of the Lord is about to break into human history once again at the end of days. Jesus is about to return to judge the living and the dead. Repentance is still the proper preparation for the coming of the Lord. But do we need it?

Like Israel, we have the sin – in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds – for which repentance is needed. We might try to hide that sin. We might try to deny that sin. But as far as comparing us with ancient Israel, the Word of God says, "There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:22-23) Even our best efforts to do good fail us. The Bible says, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."

Like Israel, lack faith in God when we put our faith in other things. We trust our religious acts to save us. Some put their faith in the fact that they've been confirmed. Some put their faith in the fact that they show up for church and put their time in. Some put their faith in the fact that they serve God in important roles in the church, such as a pastor or an officer. The list of religious things which we do in hope of attaining God's favor could go on and on.

Like Israel, we trust in our heritage. We are Lutheran and, at times, very proud of it, as if that somehow impresses God. We rest confidently in the fact that we are members in good standing of the Christian congregation. We think the fact that our names are on the membership role makes a difference before God.

Like Israel, we think that we can just go on being fruitless trees. We can talk about repentance without actually repenting. We think we can be sorry for sin or regret sinning without actually having to turn from sin or do good. We use grace as an excuse for sin and our sinful human nature as a reason we were not doing good.

Yes, we need repentance today. The wrath to come is still coming. The ax is still at the root of the fruitless trees. The fire is still burning. Where is our help? Where is our hope? John tells us that, too. When the people were trying to claim Abraham as their father, John reminded them how they became children of Abraham in the first place. He said, "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." God raises up children. Children don't raise up themselves. If God can raise up children for Abraham from dull lifeless stones, He can certainly raise up children for Himself from rebellious sinful human beings. And that is exactly what he has done.

When God intervened into human history the first time, He did so to raise up children for Himself. We anxiously await the celebration of that intervention at Christmas. God took the sin from us, the rebellious and illegitimate children, and gave it to our Older Brother, Jesus Christ. Jesus bore that sin for us; endured God's wrath in our place; and paid the price for our salvation with His own life on the cross.

Now, God gives that salvation to us by His grace. First, God works repentance in us through the preaching of the Law. When we hear the Law preached to us, our natural inclination is to ignore, rebel, or rationalize. It's not a pleasurable or enjoyable message to hear. It's like a diagnosis of cancer. It's not a pleasant message but a necessary message which leads to a cure. When the Holy Spirit works in us through the Law, He is giving us a spiritual diagnosis. He allows us to see our sin and unbelief. He makes us to feel sorrow and contrition and turn to God in faith and hope.

Secondly, God works salvation in us through the preaching of the Gospel. In our baptism (which is nothing less than the Word connected to water), God washes away our sin and saves us individually. He plants us, like individual fruit trees, in the orchard of His Kingdom. He strengthens and supports our faith through His Word read, preached, and taught to us. He feeds and nourishes our life with Him with the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, God provides good works for us to do and enables us to do them. The Word of God says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10) God has created each of us anew in Holy Baptism. He is joined us to His Son, Jesus. It is our union with Jesus which empowers us to do good works, that is, produce fruit. Jesus Himself said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) We don't have to go searching for good works to do or try to find special times to do them. God prepares good works for us to do and brings them to us. He enables us to "walk in them", that is, to live a life of good works – in our homes, in our churches, and in our communities.

To repent, that is, to turn from sin and unbelief to faith and good works, is to be where God works repentance. Be in Divine Service regularly – not to fulfill a religious requirement or in an attempt to impress God – but as your lifeline to God's mercy and strength. Here, God calls you to see yourself as He sees you – a dying sinner – and calls you to repent. Here, God renews you in faith by forgiving you all your sins. Here, God restores you for service to Him through your neighbor by strengthening your connection to Jesus through the eating of His body given for you and His blood shed for you on the cross.

Take that repentant faith out into the world. Demonstrate that repentant faith, not through mere words, but by "bearing fruit in keeping with repentance." See the many good works which God has already prepared for you to do in school, at work, in your families, and in your communities. And, then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, do those things which God has given you to do – not to earn God's favor and goodwill, but because you already have them through Jesus Christ.

Is everyone all right? You don't need a self-help book to determine that. Everyone who repents and turns from sin and unbelief to faith and good works is all right. Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ – has His righteousness, His forgiveness, and His life – is all right. Everyone who bears fruit in keeping with repentance by doing the good works which God has prepared for them to do is all right. As God has worked, is working, and will work those things in you by His Word and His Sacraments and you respond in faith and action, you are all right, too. Amen