

“Repent!”

Text: Mat 3:1-11

1) For the kingdom of heaven is at hand

Suggested Hymns:

2) What changes us? How can we repent?

6, 225, 11, 364, 544T165

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 3:1-11, ¹ *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,* ² *and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”* ³ *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.’”*

⁴ *And John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.* ⁵ *Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him* ⁶ *and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.*

⁷ *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”* ⁸ *“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,”* ⁹ *“and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”* ¹⁰ *“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

¹¹ *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus Christ is the most important figure, in the history of the world. More than that, Jesus Christ is the most important figure in the world for you and me! He came into the world to save us.

That means that Jesus came to rescue us from everlasting death. God the Father commissioned Him for His task. He carried it out successfully. We read in John 17:4 where Jesus said, ⁴ *“I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.*

That means that God had planned long ago to send Jesus to do this task. Before the world and before time, God appointed Christ to be our Saviour. When He came into the world at a point in time and a date in history to carry out His task, that was one of the most important moments in all time.

The Advent season ponders that coming. The Advent Psalm sings about it, Psalm 24:9-10, ⁹ *Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in.* ¹⁰ *Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory.*

So important for the world and for us is that coming that God set aside a special herald and instructor to tell about Jesus. That is a good idea. If people should learn any fact about anything, they must first be told what to look for.

Every teacher knows the need of preparing a pupil in advance for a lesson in any subject. But here is the greatest lesson in the world — the Saviour, Jesus Christ. Who is He? What is His business? How can I benefit through His coming?

God gave that task of preparing the world for the Saviour to the forerunner, John the Baptist. Among the great prophecies of the coming of the Saviour are those by Isaiah and Malachi concerning the herald. As we ponder John’s work and message today, may God grant that we ourselves thereby become truly prepared for our Saviour Himself and learn to take Him to our heart in faith and love. His message can be comprised in one word: “Repent!” May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. **“Repent, For The Kingdom Of Heaven Is At Hand!”**

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” is how John the Baptist preached in the wilderness of Judea, in preparation for the coming of Christ. That word “repent” has been much misunderstood. Let us study it more closely in order to get the significance of John’s message.

By repentance we often understand a feeling of regret or sadness over a mistake. The word is often associated in people's minds with "penitence" or "penance." These words involve the thought of pain.

Repentance is a religious word. People think that it is a state of mind which we owe to God because we are sinful and not the way He wants us to be. By feeling sorry God is in some way appeased. Entire religions are built up around the idea of actions and ceremonies by which the devotee shows his desire to satisfy God's demands.

For these people John's message then means that God was about to do a great work for men, and if they would get the benefit of it, they must appease God and turn Him to kindness by a demonstration of sorrow and regret.

This idea pervaded the minds of some of the people who came out to John as he preached his message. They were the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were the religious teachers of the Jews, who prided themselves on their excellent reputation for keeping the ordinances.

The Sadducees were the religious leaders in charge of the Temple worship and ritual. Both groups, on the surface, led exemplary lives and prided themselves about the fact.

You remember the Saviour's parable about the Pharisee who thanked God for the fact that he was so good. Yet they must have been conscious of unsettled accounts with God. John taunts them, ***Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*** Hence they came the long way into the wilderness to go through one more ceremonial, this time John's Baptism, as another sop to throw before God.

Their religion was one of doing the right things to be accounted a religious person. They prided themselves on their position as religious leaders, on their pedigree as descendants of the patriarchs. Between the two, the appeasement through ritual and the pedigree of blood, they imagined themselves to be in the clear with God.

John the Baptist was very rough with these men. They misunderstood his message, ***"Repent!" "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*** If human beings were perfect, he means to say, that

would be no cause for pride. That would give no right to ask God for a bonus of regard.

But man, every man, is a sinner. He has forfeited his place in the household of God. Nothing that he can do can reinstate him. That has to be God's doing altogether. Therefore ***"Repent!"*** cannot mean that men should evoke an emotion, go through a spasm of pain, through their own effort and by their own power. Trying that befits a generation of vipers, slithering deceitfully and unseen — and vainly — into the graces of God.

"Repent" means something much greater. It means literally to get a new mind and heart. We sing about true repentance in the 51st Psalm,¹ ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy holy Spirit from me."*** John called to men for a complete change. The Kingdom of God was at hand, he said. That has nothing to do with vagrant feelings of being sorry, with outward ceremonies and doleful looks and bent heads merely.

But God is King over the total person. He made man, body and mind, to be a living soul with his life in Him.² Man broke that relation, killed that life; he died. John the Baptist had the wonderful privilege to herald the Giver of that life anew; hence the Saviour Himself said, that up to His time, John was the greatest man that ever lived.³ Rightly John stated that this new life in man was to be a complete life.

Man would need a total change to be equal to the life of God and the reign of God in Him. Nothing in man's old sinful life and nature will do for this restored relation to God. ***"You must be born again,"***⁴ Jesus says of this nature if it is to apprehend Him and belong to Him.

John the Baptist went to great pains to describe this repentance which he demanded in preparation for the coming of Christ. He made clear that his Baptism was not merely a ritual or an act designed to please God; but he said that it was ***"unto repentance,"*** that is, it had the effect of creating a change in the mind and soul of the baptised person.

And then he told the Pharisees and Sadducees that repentance had to be accompanied by a change in life and character; ***fruits worthy of repentance.*** He described God's interest in this business of repentance. God is looking for a

change of heart and life, much as a gardener looks for fruit. If a tree does not produce fruit, it is chopped down. The farmer is after the grain; after he is through threshing, he merely burns the chaff. And so God wants total lives turned His way, living for His sake, alive with His power within them.

The signal of repentance is not simply a bowed head and a teary eye and a quavering hymn and a sighing prayer. But the signal that God is interested in is life itself, turned away from dead works, evil thoughts, selfish impulses, to the life that is like God and that is in God.

John the Baptist was very anxious that the people of his time would not receive Jesus Christ as they had received so many other prophets, just as something new and interesting for a moment, soon to be discarded and disregarded.

He was anxious that they should receive Jesus Christ not with mere politeness or approval or anything that our old selfish and godless nature is capable of. That is a message which we can take to heart, too. So easily we can make ourselves think that worshiping Christ and benefiting from Christ involves simply some smug effort to go through forms and sing carols and appear worshipful.

No; it means a total change of our entire selves. We Lutherans have all learned this story before — *“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.”* That ought to make clear that it does not pay to be a generation of vipers. Repentance cannot be faked. We have to be changed from the inside out and all the way.

2. What Changes Us? How Can We Repent?

Several things have confused people about this matter. One is that John the Baptist says, **“Repent!”** That sounds as though he calls on people to change; as though it is something they themselves can do. “He wouldn’t ask them to repent if it were not in their power, would he?” — is faulty reasoning.

It is faulty reasoning because that phrase “repent!” does not stand by itself. John said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”** That is another way of saying, *“Be changed, turn from death to life, through the power of God now revealed to you in Christ Jesus.”*

Do you remember Dr. Luther's interpretation of the manner in which the Kingdom of God comes to us? *"When our Heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His Holy Word and lead a godly life, here in time and hereafter in eternity."*

The Kingdom of God comes to us from the outside, from God! "Repent" is the clarion call telling us that we are rescued! We are like wounded soldiers in a collapsed building, unconscious and broken; our rescuers pull the rubble away, tenderly uncover our battered bodies, and then cry exultantly, *"Come on, fellows, you are going away from here, we'll take you, and you'll soon be well!"*

"Repent" is the call of the Herald: "Christ is here, He gives you new life!"

There is another thing people confuse about the manner in which repentance comes and makes them think that it is something that, they themselves do, rather than what is done for them by God Himself. They look at this story and say: Look, this is the Forerunner, John the Baptist. He tells people to repent because Jesus is coming. Repentance will get them ready for Jesus so he prepares the way of the Lord and makes His paths straight. That, too, is a misunderstanding.

John was the herald, we said, John told what Jesus was going to do. When he asks people to repent, he is telling them what Jesus and His coming in the world means for them, namely, a complete change from death in sin to life in God through Christ.

You see, in the very next chapter Jesus Himself begins His ministry in Galilee, and what do you suppose were the words in which He described His own work? ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"***⁵ Repentance, change of heart and rebirth unto God, is not a preparation for Christ, but it is the work of Christ and His Gospel in the heart of men! And John the Baptist had the job of telling people that, that was the business of Christ and His Gospel and His salvation, to effect a total change in people's lives, to make them live for God instead of for themselves!

In the story of our text John the Baptist describes this work of Jesus, and of the Gospel of Jesus, namely, to give people the new life and birth and implant the rule and reign of God in them. He makes clear that repentance and the Kingdom of God is not something that people produce of their own power; but it is a power and a change which God Himself works in them.

Again refer in your mind to those words we learned about the coming of the Kingdom of God — it means that God gives us faith and a new life through His Holy Spirit through His Holy Word.

True, the sorrow for sin always precedes this repentance and is present always thereafter. St. Paul tells the Corinthians about this.⁶ He points out the fact to them that the sorrow in itself is nothing; all the pain and penance in the world about sin is nothing in itself.

If a man is lost in a cave, it does him no good simply to shudder at the dark and the cold and stay sitting. But Paul says that sorrow is godly if it is to repentance, that is to say, if it is joined with faith in the Saviour and the new life of forgiveness and love.

If the man lost in the cave seeks the light and the warmth, then the horror of the dark and cold had a place in his experience. So it was that the people who came to John the Baptist and listened to his message of the Saviour frequently confessed their sins to him, and they were baptised. They were the ones that benefited from His message; in them the kingdom of heaven was at work!

And John Himself said that for such his Baptism worked repentance; it was a means which God used to bestow faith in Christ. What helped them was not merely that they confessed their sins, but that God conveyed His mighty gift of a new heart to them through the ministry of John.

In Jesus Christ this ministry reached its climax. There we have the full display of the power by which repentance is bestowed and the kingdom of heaven works in men. John himself knew that and said that; in our text he says, ***He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.***

St. John tells of the first time that John the Baptist pointed Jesus out to the people; he said, ***Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*** Christ told that same story about Himself; He described Himself as the ransom, His body as the propitiation for the sins of the world, His blood as the sacrifice of the New Testament. That message was sheer power. People listened to it as a message of authority. They found in it the rest for their souls.

Christ not only told this story in words in order to create the tool by which the Spirit gives faith and life. But He produced the story, He lived it and brought

it to pass. He gave His sinless self into death of the cross, the death of complete separation from God, to atone for the sins of the world and to make possible God's own gift of newness in men.

God summed all this up for us in 2 Corinthians 5:15-17, ¹⁵ *and [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* ¹⁶ *Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.* ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*

Hence the Word that tells that story is a seed by which men are born again,⁷ and the Baptism by which Christians impart the faith in that story is a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.⁸

John the Baptist is a picturesque and romantic figure. We can see how the whole great city of Jerusalem emptied out to the wilderness where John preached, to see his gaunt figure and hear his fearless and flaming words.

The Saviour was grateful for John's ministry and commended him in a high tribute at his death. But let us not dismiss his work with that. God's own wisdom is at work in planning this forecast and preparation for the Saviour's own ministry. John's message was necessary to make the people of Jesus' time see what He and His work were all about. Let us be sure that we have gained the understanding which he came to impart about Jesus.

His message did not mean that by some kind of artificial and sanctimonious religiousness we can be better fitted for the receiving of Jesus and faith in Jesus. It did not mean that by feeling sorry for our sins we are somehow fitted to enjoy the kindness of God.

But when John the Baptist said, "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand,*" he meant JESUS Christ. He meant that Christ had come into the world to redeem us from sin, reconcile us to God, and set up a new life within us. When he said, "*Repent,*" he meant that the work of Jesus Christ would mean the changing of people to a complete and lifelong difference from the old life of sin and selfishness and godlessness.

Hence John the Baptist pleads with us today to look at Jesus Christ and His work for its complete value. It is not a work in which we co-operate. We cannot render ourselves fit for His advent. He comes for a purpose beyond anything we can imagine or in which we can share. He comes to make us new. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Jesus must through the story of His life and work achieve in us the faith to trust in Him, to receive the full forgiveness of all of our sins from Him for the sake of His precious blood. He must through that same story work in us a new life of holiness and love.

Let this day and this season work in us the desire to have Jesus do that for us! Let Advent prepare the way of the Lord and straighten His path in our hearts in this way, that we see clearly what it means to profess Him and to believe in Him!

It means to receive the new life of God through Him, to be new people because of Him, totally new, forever! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Verses 10, 11

² Gen. 2:7

³ Matt. 11:11

⁴ John 3:7

⁵ Matt. 4:17

⁶ 2 Cor. 7:9,10

⁷ 1 Pet. 1:23

⁸ Tit. 3:5