

REPENT! FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Advent, 2025
Matthew 3:1-12

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

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading read before, Matthew 3:1-12: **In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is He who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,**

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make His paths straight.’ ”

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Even now the axe 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.

¹¹ “I baptise you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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

Dear friends in Christ,

John began preaching in the desert country near the Dead Sea along the Jordan River, a landscape that was barren, wild and mountainous. Wearing **“a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist,”** and eating **“locusts and wild honey,”** his message was **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

Usually, the first thing people notice about John is how unusual his food and clothing are. However, wearing this type of clothing wasn’t unique to John. Many years earlier, the prophet Elijah had worn the same kind of attire.¹

Again, the wild honey John ate was plentiful in the desert region, and locusts were a common food among poor people when nothing better was available. Once more, this isn't anything unusual. The Law of Moses specifically told the Israelites: *“You may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper”* (Lev. 11:22).

Anyhow, the way John dressed and what he ate were not as important as the message he preached. Matthew identified John as the one **“who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight,’”** and his message, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”** echoed the call of all the Old

¹ 2 Kings 1:8

Testament prophets, and soon Jesus Himself would also be calling His people to repentance.

To repent literally means to ‘*change one’s mind.*’ The full definition of repentance includes recognising sin as an act of disobedience to God’s commandments, feeling truly sorry for sin, having the sincere desire to amend sinful ways, and trusting in the Lord alone for forgiveness and salvation; furthermore, it is not a one-time act. In his 95 Theses, Luther declared that *the entire life of a Christian is to be characterised by repentance*, and in his *Small Catechism*, Luther tells us that our baptism should remind us to drown our old Adam by daily contrition and repentance.

John’s call upon Israel to repent was a plea for them to turn and be converted, to become once again the flock of the divine Shepherd. The Israel of John’s day was a flock of lost sheep, so John was calling them away from God’s final judgment towards conversion and true faith in the God from whom they had wandered. By their unbelief, they had become like the exiled Israelites who had fallen away. He told them “**the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” “Kingdom” refers not to a geographical location but to God’s act of ruling. God’s rule was near in Christ. That was the thrust of John’s message. The promised Saviour had entered the world. Jesus was about to begin His public ministry. After living a life of perfect obedience to all of God’s commandments, He would willingly lay down His life on Calvary’s cross to atone for the sins of the world. On the third day He would rise again, proving that God’s kingdom had triumphed over the kingdom of Satan. These momentous events were about to unfold soon.

The people needed to repent of all the misconceptions they had about the Saviour. If they held a wrong idea of who the Saviour was supposed to be, then they would not appreciate the Saviour for who He truly is. If they’re looking for the wrong things in a Messiah, *then they would not recognise Him when He appeared*. Remember, John was to “**prepare the way of the Lord.**” He did this by teaching them the true nature of their sinfulness, so that they would see their need for the Saviour; and he prepares them by teaching them who the Saviour is, and what He will do.

We observe this in the incident when the Pharisees and Sadducees confronted John. Both groups had their own ideas about what the Saviour would be like. Aside from their shared opposition to Jesus and His message, they had little in common. The Pharisees believed they were righteous in God’s eyes because they strictly kept the Law, even adding many of their own regulations to the Law. They thought they were not even close to the point where God would condemn them. If others wanted to repent, that was fine, but they felt they had no need to do so. The Sadducees, on the other hand, did not believe in the resurrection or angels. Their focus was solely on this life and this world, so they showed no interest in the kingdom of heaven that John was proclaiming.

Why then did the Pharisees and Sadducees come out to John to be baptised by him?

Simply because they saw all the people flocking out to John, and *did not want to be left out*. They were the religious leaders of the Jews, and they hoped to hold on to their power and prestige by going along with the crowd and not openly opposing such a popular messenger of God. But they were not able to deceive John. He said to them, “**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**”

Calling them a brood of vipers was like calling them children of the devil. The “**wrath to come**” from which they were trying to flee is described by John as a fire of divine judgment. “**I baptise you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.**”

Just as vipers or snakes would scurry away from a brush fire or a burning stubble field, so these people were trying to escape God’s judgment by going through the motions of baptism, but they would not

succeed. To be baptised would only have increased their guilt before God, just as unworthy communicants are warned that they only bring God's judgement upon themselves.²

These Pharisees and Sadducees needed to understand that salvation does not come from their rules or even their ancestry. They had to stop saying, "*The Messiah will save us because of who we are and what we do.*" Their thinking had to change so that they could genuinely say, "*The Messiah will save us because of who He is and what He has done.*" Acknowledge your sin and unworthiness and trust solely in what Christ has done—that's the proper way to prepare for the Saviour's coming.

"The kingdom of heaven is at hand." How must we see these words?

If we see in them a dire warning to shape up and be sorry now, because when the kingdom of heaven comes, we are going to be in big trouble if we haven't repented, then okay, but we must not miss *the real point* John is trying to make. John isn't using the coming kingdom as a threat to make people fall into line; no, instead, he's preaching glorious news. "**The kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" Why? *Because the King is about to arrive!* John has been preparing the way for the Saviour who is no less than the Lord Himself, and the Lord Himself is about to make an appearance. In fact, the very next verse after our text today says: "*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John*" (Matt. 3:13). Jesus is about to appear and be baptised. After preparing the crowds for the arrival of the Saviour, John will soon point at the Saviour—in the flesh—and cry out, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

Dear friends, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" That is, let go of all your preconceived ideas about who you think Jesus should be, and instead, *rejoice in who He already is.* He is the only Son of God, who became flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary, to be our Saviour. As the Saviour, He has carried all our sins to the cross and endured God's judgement for them there. He has died our death and risen again, thus conquering death and earning salvation for us, and He has promised that He will return in glory to bring us to eternal life. That's who our Saviour is, according to His own Word, and yet many wish for Him to be something else instead.

That's exactly the temptation that's always near to our sinful flesh. Many want Jesus to be a Saviour different from who He truly is, instead of trusting Him as the Saviour He is. Our sinful desires try to put Jesus in a box and transform Him into a messiah that suits *our preferences*; each of our desires attempts to limit the holy Son of God, making Him less than He truly is.

Think of the Pharisees and their belief that heaven belongs to them because of what they do. So many have that Pharisee-ism that says: "*I am saved—at least in part—by what I do or who I am. God looks at me, and He sees something good. This goodness He sees may be my works or my intentions. It may be my feelings and yearnings. It may be the decision I have made to follow Him. I'm not sure what it is, but there is something about me that triggers His love and Jesus' salvation for me.*" This all sounds pretty decent and sincere, but look at it again. If you say, "*I am saved, at least in part because of what I do or who I am,*" then you are in effect saying, "*Jesus didn't quite do enough for me by coming to earth, dying on the cross, and rising again to save me. I have to add to His death and resurrection and help by doing my part.*" Can you see what happens? The desire to play a part in our own salvation actually ends up robbing Jesus of His glory and taking some of it for ourselves, and if we persist in believing that our works contribute to our salvation, then we are certainly not going to listen to the Lord who declares "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If anyone trusts in their own works, then they will miss the Saviour who has done all the work. Anyone who thinks that they contribute to their salvation *needs to repent.*

² 1 Corinthians 11:27-30

Then there is the Sadducee in us who says, “*All I want out of Jesus is help for this life. If He helps me when I’m in a pickle, or cures me of my ailments, or keeps me wealthy and prosperous and out of trouble, well, that’s the Saviour I’m looking for. I’m not really worried about the final judgement, the resurrection of the dead, heaven and hell or eternal life. I want a Saviour who’s going to show results here and now.*”

If this is the Saviour anyone is looking for, then they will pass right by Jesus. He has declared that He’s sacrificed Himself to make us holy, not popular or successful in the world. He has warned that the world will persecute the Church.³ He says that He disciplines His children and even uses weakness and affliction to strengthen their faith.⁴ If anyone is looking for a saviour to make this world a paradise, they will go right past Jesus. Rather, He has come to deliver us from this sinful world to everlasting paradise. Anyone who lives only for the here and now needs to change their minds while there is still time, in other words, *repent*.

Finally, there is that old Adam in all of us who just doesn’t want to be righteous, that just wants to hold on to sin. Have you ever had the thought, “*I know that Jesus loves me so much, but I’m going to continue to hold on to this sin for a number of reasons. It makes my life easier; I’m afraid to live without it, I like it, I’m addicted to it. At any rate, the Saviour tells me that He’ll save me anyway.*” This thinking is quite popular, but it’s not the Jesus the Scriptures proclaim. God’s Word tells us to “*put to death your members, which are on the earth: sexual sin, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry*” (Col. 3:5). Jesus has borne all our sins to the cross and suffered for them there. He did not go to the cross to let us hold on to such poison; He died to set us free! Can you see? To hold on to sin now is to say that we want a Saviour who dies for most of our sins, but not all of them. We must change our minds while there’s still time, in other words, *repent*.

“**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” Christmas is only a couple of short weeks away. Look forward to that day. See Mary as she cradles that newborn Child. The King is born in Bethlehem - the shepherds gather around Him because they know He is their King. However, this King is just as near to us today as He was to His parents and those shepherds. He comes near to us today in His Word and Sacraments. He does not yet come with “**His winnowing shovel**” to sweep the sinner into judgment. Now, today, He comes with grace, He comes to forgive us all our sins, to strengthen our faith, and to prepare us for everlasting life.

The King is here to forgive us all our sins. Lay them all on Jesus. Every sin we have committed in the past, those we commit today, and those we commit tomorrow—all are forgiven if we repent. And all this is not because of who we are or what we do, but because of *who Jesus is*.

Jesus has saved us from all our sins. He has made the path straight for us to enter His eternal kingdom. Because He is at hand, all our sins have been forgiven. We do not have to fear the coming judgment; instead, in this sin-stained world, we lift up our heads and rejoice, for our salvation is drawing closer. Amen.

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

³ John 15:18

⁴ Proverbs 3:12; Hebrews 12:6