

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday in Advent, December 7, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 272, 58:1, 63, 328, 60.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11, Acts 13:16-34, Luke 3:1-20.

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Today, every great and important person sends someone ahead when they travel to make arrangements for the great person. Nowhere is this more obvious than when a president or king goes somewhere. Publicity, transportation, meals, lodging – all are arranged by the ‘advance men’.

Well, when God sent his only-begotten Son into the world to save mankind from their sins, he sent a number of advance men, starting hundreds and hundreds of years before his Son came.

The preparations were far different than would be made for a king’s coming today.

Today we look at the advance man who came just before the ministry of God’s Son was revealed to the world.

JOHN THE BAPTIST PREPARES THE WAY FOR JESUS CHRIST

- 1. He and his work were foretold in the Scriptures.**
- 2. His message was one of repentance and the forgiveness of sins**
- 3. He made very clear that he was just an ‘advance man’.**

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

John began preaching in the desert country near the Dead Sea along the Jordan River. This country was barren, uninhabited, wild, and mountainous. This countryside was an appropriate symbol of the spiritual state of God’s chosen people of Israel. It also reminds us of the wilderness where the Israelites wandered for 40 years when their unbelief delayed their entry into the Promised Land. In the wilderness John the Baptist called the people to repent of their sins, and he pointed to the Messiah, who alone could bring people into the kingdom of God. John came because it was necessary that the hearts of people be properly prepared,

"People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."

John's message of repentance echoed the message of all the Old Testament prophets, and soon Jesus would also be calling his people to repentance. Repentance involves a change of mind and heart and a change of direction in daily behavior and life. The complete definition of repentance includes recognizing all your sins as disobedience to God's commandments, feeling truly sorry for all your sin, having the sincere desire to amend your sinful ways, and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness and salvation.

Repentance is not a one-time activity. In his 95 Theses, which mark the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther declared that the entire life of a Christian is to be characterized by repentance. In his Small Catechism, Luther tells us that our baptism should remind us to drown our old Adam by daily contrition and repentance. There is really no such thing as an impenitent Christian, and it is not possible to repent of only some of our sins. Repentance includes all our sins, even those of which we may not be aware, and Jesus' forgiveness

is also total. When he forgives us, all is forgiven. Anything less would be of no value, for the guilt of a single sin would condemn the sinner to eternal torment in hell.

John came preaching to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for the coming of the great King of Mercy. The king's highway must be level and straight, without deviations of hypocrisy, without twists and turns of selfishness. That was the chief message of his preaching and work. He realized that complete change of mind and heart from mankind's sinful human nature was necessary as preparation for the Messiah to come.

John was telling people **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are synonyms. These terms do not refer to earthly territory or to citizens or subjects we can see and count. This kingdom will be fully revealed when Jesus comes to earth a second time, to judge the living and the dead. These words refer to God's gracious rule in people's hearts. These terms describe the process by which God saves sinners. The climax of that saving process was at hand, for the promised Savior had come into 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 the 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 going to happen soon. Jesus, the very Son of God, was now also a human adult living on earth. That was why John could proclaim, **"The kingdom of heaven is near."**

"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? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.'"

John did not baptize everybody who came to him seeking to be baptized. He commanded people to repent, and he required that they show visible fruits of repentance. When many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized, he absolutely refused because there were no fruits of repentance in their lives. He called them a **"brood of vipers."** The Pharisees and Sadducees had little in common except their opposition to Jesus and his message. The Pharisees believed they were righteous in God's sight because they kept the law. They even added many regulations of their own to the laws of Moses, so they couldn't imagine that God could condemn them. Repentance was fine for others, but they didn't think they needed it personally. The Sadducees, on the other hand, did not believe in any resurrection or in the existence of angels. They were concerned only about this life and this world. They had no interest in the kingdom of heaven that John was proclaiming.

We might wonder why these Pharisees and Sadducees come to John to be baptized. Well, they saw the people flocking out to John, and they did not want to be left out. They, after all, together with the priests, were the religious leaders of the Jews. Surely 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.

When John addressed them as a **"brood of vipers,"** that was like calling them children of the devil. In Genesis chapter 3 the devil had spoken to Eve through a serpent. Genesis 3:15, the first promise of the Savior to come, spoke of the enmity that would exist between the offspring of the woman – Jesus – and the offspring of the devil. That enmity became more and more evident during Jesus' ministry and reached its climax in his trial and crucifixion. Even we sometimes forget, in the face of temptations from the devil, from the world, and from our own sinful flesh, that they are our enemies, and want nothing less than to destroy us, first here on earth, and finally in hell eternally.

The **"coming wrath"** from which they were trying to flee is described in following verses as a fire of divine judgment. **"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."** The reference, of course, is to the fires of hell.

Just as serpents would hurry away from a brush fire or a burning field of grass, so these people were trying to escape God's judgment by going through the motions of baptism, but they would not succeed. To be baptized would only have increased their guilt before God—just as unworthy communicants are warned that they only bring God's judgment upon themselves. We read in First Corinthians: **"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."**

(1 Corinthians 11:27-29) It is faith that makes one a truly worthy communicant, and even John could see that visible fruits of faith were lacking in the lives of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Being Abraham's descendants did not mean automatic acceptance into God's kingdom—even though these Pharisees and Sadducees and many more of the Jews imagined that nothing more was required of them. John told them: ***“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.”*** No one can get to heaven by virtue of the faith or piety of his ancestors. As a matter of fact, unbelieving and impenitent children and descendants of pious parents and grandparents are especially guilty before God. They had special opportunities to know their Lord and his way of salvation, but they despised God's Word and the Savior who is revealed there. Just as God had made Adam out of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7) and had made Eve from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:22), so he could also make children of Abraham out of the stones of the desert if he so desired. He wasn't "stuck with" unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees just because they were physical descendants of Abraham.

God doesn't need any of us either. If we insist on going our own way or trying to get into heaven on our own terms, God will reject us and find plenty of other people to populate heaven fully. We must not imagine that he needs us. At the same time, let us never forget that he wants us and that Jesus has done everything necessary for our eternal salvation.

Unproductive trees are marked for destruction. They are chopped out of the ground at the roots and thrown into the fire. Then room becomes available for productive trees. In the same way, professing Christians who produce no fruits of faith will be separated from believers at the time of God's judgment, and they will be thrown into the lake of fire that will never be quenched. Jesus makes the same point in his parable of a wedding feast. Those who refused to wear the wedding garments provided by the bridegroom and insisted on being admitted on their own terms were cast outside into darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 22:1-14)

John makes very clear that he is not the Messiah, but simply one preparing the way for Jesus. ***“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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.”***

Matthew identifies John as the ***“voice in the desert”*** of whom Isaiah the prophet had spoken (Isaiah 40:3). To ***“prepare the way for the Lord”*** and ***“make straight paths for him”*** was essentially a description of the repentance John called for. Just as the road would be smoothed and straightened and leveled for an approaching king in John's day, so John's hearers were to clear away everything that would be an obstacle to Christ's coming to them. It was like saying, "Christ is coming. Drop everything and get ready to welcome him!"

As we prepare again for the celebration of Jesus' coming, may we approach God with truly penitent hearts and lives full of fruits of repentance. May John's message prepare our hearts day after day to welcome Jesus into our hearts each day. Amen.