

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

“Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight” (Matt 3:3).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Tis the
season for *preparation* – the season of great *anticipation*.

Days off from work
and school are on the near horizon –

days of cookies and
feasting, of family and visiting, of gifts and celebration...

What do
YOU look forward to the most?

What is your longing
throughout this Season of Advent, and how are you preparing for it?

“IN
THOSE DAYS,” as we hear in our Gospel reading this morning,

John the Baptist came
preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:1-2).

And IN THOSE DAYS,
the people would have been very excited about that...

Because in THOSE
days, people did not think of the Kingdom of Heaven as some place you went
when
you died...

No, for
them, the Kingdom of Heaven was about the reign and rule of God here and now –
it was about the
action, the activity, the “kinging” of the King of kings who “kings” over ALL
things visible and invisible.

For them, salvation
was never about “dying and going to heaven,”
but
about the “Kingdom of Heaven” coming for us.

Which
is why in THOSE days,

the people were
actually waiting and watching with eager anticipation for their Messiah who
would break into this world, conquer their enemies,

and
restore them to peace.

And now, according
to John the Baptist, that Day had come: “The Kingdom of heaven IS at hand” (Mat
3:2).

Indeed,
the people could hardly believe their ears, because they knew what this meant.

They knew this meant
the Day of Promise, the moment they had been waiting for and watching for, had
finally come.

They
knew that in the same way that God had once broken into history to deliver
their ancestors out of Egypt by His mighty deeds,

the Day had finally
come when the whole world would now be delivered to everlasting peace.

The *present age*

of Satan's dominion and his reign of terror and death was coming to an end,

and a *new age*,

a whole new creation – the stuff of lambs lying down with lions, was about to take its place.

Yes,

their King HAD come, which means the time had now come to meet Him!

And the great Advent

question remains, "How *shall* we meet our King who comes for us?

"O Lord, how *shall*

we meet You, how welcome you aright" (LSB 344)?

Today,

John the Baptist gives us the answer:

"Repent!" he says,

"The

One you've been waiting for and watching for has now come...

and if you want to

stand in His presence and escape His terrible wrath, then repent!"

Wow...

Just like that, things turn kind of ominous, right?

I mean, what is this

business of wrath and unquenchable fire that John speaks of? What is this business of repentance?

What is this

preparation that the people, you and me included, are being called to?

In the words of many

who have gone before us, *what must we do to be saved?*

In

answer, John provides an extraordinary object lesson:

He calls sinners back to the Jordan -

back to that *water*

where their life with God in His kingdom first began.

If

you'll recall, after God had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt and provided for them throughout their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness,

He delivered them to

the Promised Land through the water, right?

He literally opened

the way through the Jordan for Israel to enter into this new life in this new world as His newly rescued and restored people to live under Him in His kingdom.

He would be their King, they would be His people,

and

it would all be good once again, just like Eden...

But it

was *not* good, for the people of God soon wandered like sheep without a shepherd.

They all went astray

(Isa 53:6), ordering their lives entirely in relationship to the pagan world around them, shopping for gifts, partying,

and literally making

a kingdom for themselves while divorcing themselves from God's Word, God's Communion, and the life that God had called them to.

They

separated themselves from their Creator and from the relationship that began with that passage through the water,

and in the end, they
suffered His judgment as the unquenchable fire utterly destroyed the kingdom
they had been given.

Good
thing nothing like that would ever happen to us, right?

I mean, none of *us*
would ever lay aside God's Word, put our partying before our Communion with
God,

or get wrapped up in
the pleasures and pursuits of this pagan world without a thought about how we
should be ordering our lives in faith toward God or in love toward one another...

Well,
perhaps you're not making those mistakes,

but I certainly am,
which is why I'm really interested in what John has to say this morning.

For John has been
sent to prepare me... to prepare you...! to prepare the way of the Lord. How?

By
pointing us BACK to the water!

If
you'll notice, John calls the people BACK to that place where their new life in
God's kingdom began -

BACK to that place
where God had made them His own and delivered them to new life in the
promised
land.

And by
returning to that water of the Jordan,

they were not only

being turned away from their sin and the kingdom that they had made for themselves,

but were in fact
turning back to that water and to a new start through the forgiveness of sins.

And to
this day, that is what repentance is.

Repentance is the
ongoing return to the new life you were given in the water of your Baptism –

the daily turning from your sin and returning to God's forgiveness –

confessing your sin,
your wandering, and your endless devotion to yourself,

and taking your
place once again under your King in His kingdom in everlasting righteousness,
innocence, and blessedness.

Just
don't make the mistake of thinking that this call to repentance is a call to *self*-
righteousness,
as if you could ever be "good enough" or "obedient enough" to stand by your own
merits.

For repentance is NOT
about turning inward on yourself to walk the straight and narrow,

but
about returning to your King who credits you with HIS righteousness.

After
all, the consequence of the sin which has clothed us from our conception is
that we can *never* BE good enough –

we can *never*
BE righteous enough or obedient enough to stand before God in His kingdom.

Only
Jesus could do that...

Only
Christ is righteous, and it is His righteousness *alone* that covers your
sin -

His righteousness *alone* that gives you peace with God
-

His righteousness *alone*
that He pours out for you through the water of Holy Baptism.

And
that is where John points us today:

back to the water -

back
to the forgiveness of sins and that place where your new life began -

back to that place
where God graciously ushered you into His kingdom by clothing You in His Son's
righteousness.

That
was John's message then, and it's John's message now:

Your King HAS come!
The Kingdom of Heaven IS at hand! [Altar]

Repent!

Confess
your sin, receive the forgiveness of Him who comes for you in His body and
blood,

and get back to
ordering your lives in obedience to your King who *gives* you heaven and
new life *here and now*.

In
the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon Text: Matthew

3:1-12