

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
December 9, 2007

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning is the Gospel, which was read earlier.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This is the message which I heard one summer in downtown Indianapolis. Some friends of mine and I spent the day taking in some free concerts put on by one of the local radio stations. As we were walking around the downtown Indy Circle, we came across a man who had a cross about 7 foot tall handing out end times pamphlets. His message, which he was shouting to any and all who were in earshot was the same message which John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness of Judea: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

How is one to repent? What is it that they are supposed to do? What does it mean to repent?

We normally think of repenting as being sorry for our sins. This is true enough, but there's more depth to it than that. To “repent” in the Greek means literally to “change one's mind.” You can see the obvious: when you repent of sin, you're saying, “I thought it was a good thing, but now I know it's not.” That's a repentant mind-change that happens only by the grace of God. But again, there's a greater depth to repentance because there's a greater depth to sin. When John calls the people to repent, he is calling them to repent of all of their misconceptions and wrong ideas about the Savior. If they have the wrong idea of who the Savior is supposed to be, then they're not going to like

the Savior for who He truly is. If they're looking for the wrong things in a Messiah, then they're not going to recognize Him when He makes His appearance. Remember, John the Baptist is called by God to prepare the way of the Lord. He therefore prepares the people by teaching them the true nature of their sinfulness, so that they see the need for the Savior; and he prepares them by teaching them who the Savior is, and what He will do.

People from the region of Jerusalem and Judea and the Jordan were coming to John the Baptist to be baptized and confessing their sins. For the people who came to John the Baptist, they were contrite and believed. They desired to repent, to change their minds, but more importantly, they desired to hear the message of the coming Messiah.

John the Baptist is an important man with an important message. The prophet Isaiah saw that John the Baptist was to come and wrote what he saw John the Baptist preaching: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

The setting, the clothing, everything is all for a reason, to prepare the way of the Lord. And as crowds gather to hear this prophet speak and prepare, here is the summary of his sermon: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*”

We hear that same message today, but are we eager to do as John the Baptist says, repent? It's not something that comes easy to us. It's not something that we like to admit, that we did something wrong and that we need to repent, to ask for forgiveness.

However, that is exactly what we are supposed to do.

We tend to find ourselves like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were strict teachers of the law. The Pharisees put great stress on outward

observance of the law. The Sadducees rejected much of the rabbinical tradition. They were freethinkers and skeptics. Both groups believed that they were right with God because of who they were and what they did. It did not occur to them that their teachings might be in error. They were confident of themselves. Because of that confidence, they could do no wrong. They were not sinners in their own eyes.

As far as some are concerned, we believe that we are right with God. We can do no wrong. We are not sinners. But where do we get that notion from? We don't get it from Scripture because Scripture says that "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are not sinful, but that is all that it is, a deception.

Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we make excuses to our behavior. They make the claim, "*We have Abraham as our father.*" Abraham was a God-fearing man. He followed the law of God. But just because they descended from Abraham, did that make them any less of a sinner? No it did not. To be honest, the statement that the Pharisees and Sadducees and all of mankind should make is "We have Adam as our father." We don't want to make that statement because if we do, then we acknowledge "that we are sinful and unclean." We acknowledge that we have sinned against God "in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone." No one wants to admit that fact. We would much rather say that we have Abraham as our father because Abraham was "good." If we say that we have Adam as our father, that's a black mark because Adam was "bad." Let's face it: we would much rather be "good" than "bad."

What we fail to understand, just as did the Pharisees and Sadducees, is that we are not “good” because of our sinful nature; we are like the tree that does not bear good fruit; it is cut down and thrown into the fire. We have all shared in Adam and Eve's sampling of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, our lives are unfruitful. We do not do the works that God requires; in fact, we cannot do them. God's righteous judgment comes down upon Israel and it comes down also upon us.

Instead of leaving us with just judgment, doom and gloom, John the Baptist also promises something beyond our wildest imaginations: the coming of the Savior.

Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”* John the Baptist is the one crying in the wilderness of the coming Messiah. He is making the paths straight by preaching a message of repentance to the people, to prepare them for Christ's arrival. John the Baptist comes to lead people to repentance, to baptize with water. When Jesus arrives, *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* He is coming to do something far greater than John the Baptist, the Pharisees, Sadducees or we could ever do: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*

Repent, because there is still time. In other words, repent, because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We look forward to Christmas in just a couple weeks' time. The King is born in Bethlehem, which is why the shepherds will gather there, too. But the King is just as near to you as He is to Mary the day of His birth. He graces you with His presence in His Word and His Sacraments. He does not yet come with winnowing fork, to sweep the sinner into judgment. Still, now, He comes with grace - to forgive your sins,

to strengthen your faith, to prepare you for everlasting life. Even now in Word and Sacrament we feast upon Christ as our tree of life. He is the vine and we are the branches. By Word and Sacrament, we bring forth the fruit of repentance and live in trust and obedience. He declares to you even now, “Repent, because I am at hand; and because I am here, you are forgiven for all of your sins.” In the name of Jesus, amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, amen.