

**Matthew 3:1-12** In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” <sup>3</sup>Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

<sup>4</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. <sup>6</sup>They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. <sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! <sup>9</sup>Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup>Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup>I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven is near! What does that actually mean? We might think of that image of the guy wearing the sandwich board sign calling for everyone to repent because, “The end is near.” But that wasn’t really John’s message when he said that the kingdom of heaven was near. Certainly there’s an element of urgency in the message, but today we’ll see that it wasn’t his main message. It was something much less foreboding. He was trying not so much to convey fearful apprehension but, rather, joyful anticipation!

The kingdom of heaven is near. To understand what that means we have to know that what the kingdom of heaven is. A kingdom is an area of rule, the area where the king’s power and authority exist. Outside of the kingdom the king has no power. His word means nothing. His decrees hold no weight. God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, is his rule in our hearts. His power and glory. And what is the essence of his power and glory? His love. His grace. The gospel message, the good news of a promised Savior to take the sins of the world away.

So if the kingdom of heaven is near, what does that mean? The Gospel is near. The good news is near. It’s about to be fulfilled!

So that changes our perspective when it come to John’s command to repent! He’s not saying, “Repent or else!” but as Isaiah had said, “Repent in order to prepare.” **“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”**

What better way to prepare the way of the Lord, the Savior, than by understanding and acknowledging our need for him. What better way to do that than by seeing the danger of our sin, admitting how helpless we are because of sin when it comes to our relationship with God who demands perfection, and turning from them. Why? Because the kingdom of God’s grace is near — the one who was promised to come and rescue us from our sins is here.

John was sent and had come to prepare the way for Jesus, to get the people ready to move on from all those vivid OT pictures of their sins and God’s grace — the animal sacrifices and ceremonial laws — and to see their fulfillment in Jesus. So John’s message was not, “Repent, *or else* face the fires of hell,” but “Repent, *because someone else* has come to face those fires for you.”

The kingdom of heaven was near! How wonderful a message that was for God’s people then. Their long night of waiting and watching and hoping and praying for God to send the Messiah had finally come to an end. The promise God had made to Adam and Eve, that he had spoke to the devil about his defeat, was finally being fulfilled.

Here we are over 2000 years later, still we take time this time of year to hear and heed the words of John the Baptist. Repent! Not or else, but because! The Kingdom of God is near! His grace, his gospel, his good news of a Savior is near! It’s right here. It’s in your hand and mouth, both in the words of all the Christmas carols we get to sing about the Savior’s birth, and here in the very body and blood of that child grown up, shed for you on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins.

At times we repent out of fear, yes — fear of the consequences of our sinful thoughts, words, and action. Certainly the thought of facing the fires of hell for all temerity is a terrifying thought. But here, in Advent, we get to focus on that side of repentance that says not, *I better* repent, or *I have* to repent, but *I get* to repent. God has made it possible for me to turn from my sins because he fulfilled his promise and has given me a Savior, his Son, Jesus.

That truth is what makes this a most wonderful time of the year. We remember that we *get* to repent of our sins because God has provided a solution to them — a baby, his Son, **born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law**. And so we do all we can to welcome him. That's the purpose of all the decorations and the lights and the presents. Everywhere you look this time of year is a reminder that God fulfilled his promise and solved the problem of our sins.

Sadly, many hang the decorations, put up the lights, and exchange presents without any thought about the Savior. It's become all about a different man with the title that starts with S. For them, they are just blindly going through the motions, because these are the things you do a Christmas. How sad. How empty. How meaningless.

That was the Pharisees and Sadducees in John's day. They came out to John not to repent or to welcome the Savior, but for themselves, to go through another Ceremonial Washing. See, that's all the Ceremonial Law had become for them and many of God's people throughout the Old Testament. The many sacrifices had become not a picture of God taking away their sins by the shedding of innocent blood, but something they did for God. The washings they were to do to make themselves clean after things like touching a dead body or eating the wrong kind of meat, had become not a picture of God washing their sinfulness away, but something again that they did for God. So when they heard this man of God, this so-called Prophet, John the Baptizer, speaking God's Word and providing another ceremonial washing, they saw it as another thing they could do to for God. They got in line.

They were not there to repent. They were not there with load of sins, desperate to hear the words, "You are forgiven." They were not there to flee the coming wrath. They were there simply to pad their resumés, to add another washing to their list of why they didn't need God's Savior.

God have mercy if Christmas ever becomes that way for us. A going through the motions, or worse, something we do for God. Understand that's Satan's goal for sin in your life— to drive you away from God, to march you straight out of his kingdom, away from the Gospel, away from your Savior, or any thought that you need him. Daily the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh threaten to take away what is most important — our faith, hope, and trust in God's promises. It might not be today that it happens, but today might be the day sin takes hold, and tomorrow takes hold a little more, a little more next week, a little more the week after that.

It may seem like the journey to losing our faith is a million miles long, but the journey of a million miles begins with just one step.

What are we doing to make sure we aren't on that journey? What do we do if we find we are? or have been for some time? Is it hopeless? Are we doomed, is it too late? No. Whether you're on mile 1 or 750,000, still, the kingdom of heaven is near! Repent! Jesus has taken care of that sin too. Your baptism was more than just a ceremonial washing. It was more than just a picture of sins washed away. Certainly it wasn't something you did for God, but something God did for you. For all your sins Jesus came into this world to live, suffer and die. When you were baptized, you were joined to your Savior's life and death. Your sins were really washed away. You really are forgiven. Your eternity with him is secure.

The Kingdom of heaven is near! Live in that kingdom! How long will it be here? How long will we have this kind of access to his Word and promises and sacrament? How long before health makes it impossible to come, or the government says "no more, not like that?" How long before the Lord calls us home or returns on the last day, bringing our time of grace to an end?

The Kingdom of Heaven is near now! Welcome him every chance you get! Come to church, hear the Word of life he speaks to you each time. Receive the sacrament, again, not an act you do for God, but one where he comes to you and says, take and eat, this is my body and blood, given and poured out for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. And see the decorations and the lights, and the trees, and the presents not just as going through the motions of an earthly celebration of Christmas, but each one a wonderful reminder of what God has done for us — he sent us the Savior each of us so desperately needed. For his sake he says to each of us the words we so desperately need to hear — "Your sins are forgiven. You are right with God. Eternal life in heaven is my free gift to you."

Repent! Welcome him, Believe him!...or don't. One thing John made clear to the people of his day was that you either listen to the words and promises of God and believe them by the Spirit's power, or your reject them by your own power. The Holy Spirit doesn't force anyone to faith. But there's no middle ground. **His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor.** No one will be left. **He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

We hope that those Pharisees and Sadducees, anyone who rejected the truth that God's promise was fulfilled in Jesus, would have heard and

followed through on John's call to repent. The kingdom of heaven was so near.

And still is. Repent! Because of Jesus, we can, without fear of God's punishment, turn from our sins and turn to our Savior. With a Savior like that, certainly let us strive to welcome him with all we do, this season of Advent, at Christmas, and until he returns. In his name, Amen!