

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Advent 2, Series C  
Saturday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Sunday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon: Repentance Means Change**

**Text: Luke 3:1-14**

Focus: God forgives those who repent of their sins.

Function: That they would live changed lives as a sense of repentance.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “This baptizing with water... indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (SC, 4<sup>th</sup> Part on Baptism).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. In our Gospel lesson Luke the Evangelist tells us about the ministry of John the Baptist, who came “to prepare the way of the Lord” Jesus Christ (Luke 3:4, ESV).<sup>1</sup> John was Jesus’ cousin, but what matters more than their family connection was their spiritual relationship and John’s preparatory role for Jesus’ ministry at his first coming.

John went into the wilderness preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). Baptism was a strange thing for John to expect Jews to do. Baptism was for Gentile converts to Judaism. After their circumcision, they would go naked into a pool of water (called a *mikvah*) and come out of the water as a son or daughter of Israel. But Jews didn’t need Baptism—or so they thought!

John’s Baptism raised suspicion and caused contention among the Jewish religious leaders (cf. John 1:19-28). Nevertheless, John called for the people to be baptized, and they responded in droves. John preached to crowds (v. 7). He was the original big tent revivalist. He

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

told the people that Messiah was coming, and they needed to prepare the way of the Lord by repenting of their sins and undergoing baptism.

In the Old Testament Scriptures in which John was steeped, repentance means doing a 180°, a complete turn-around.<sup>2</sup> Repentance means that you stop sinning and return to the Lord for his mercy and grace. In the New Testament, repentance means have a change of mind, a change of heart, a completely different outlook on the world.<sup>3</sup> Either way, repentance means *change*. Out with the old, in with the new! You go into the water as one kind of person, and you come out as quite another sort.

John's baptism was *not* Christian Baptism (cf. Acts 19:1-7). John's disciples were not baptized into the name of Jesus or in the Triune name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cp. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:38). Yet there was a strong connection between John's baptism and Christian Baptism. His was preparatory, a baptism of repentance. And it did bring about, or effect, the forgiveness of sins. As a result of John's baptism, God forgave people's sins. It was "a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Luke 3:3). Christ himself would undergo John's baptism (3:21-22). And if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, and their sins are forgiven.

It might have seemed well enough for people to just come and get baptized and then to go on with their lives. Even today, many families come to have their children or grandchildren baptized at our church only to never be seen again once the water dries. Rather than a baptism of repentance and newness of life, they regard baptism as a kind of vaccine against the "sin virus." But that kind of baptism will not save you.

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrew: *shūv*.

<sup>3</sup> Greek: *metanoia*.

Nor can we rely on our parents' faith in order to be saved. The Jews in the first century felt confident and secure in their salvation simply because of their birth. They were descendants of Abraham, to whom God gave the promises and covenants, and so, they assumed, they gained automatically admittance into the kingdom of God. But not so! As John declared, "Do not begin 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" (Luke 3:8).

You cannot rely on someone else's faith in order to be saved (cf. John 1:12-13). Just because your parents are Christians doesn't mean you'll be saved. Just because your grandfather was a Lutheran pastor doesn't mean you'll be saved. Just because you're on the books as a member of a Christian congregation doesn't mean you'll be saved. Just because you memorize Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* or can sing the hymnal by heart doesn't mean you'll be saved. You yourself must repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if you are to be saved (Acts 2:38!). "God so loved the world" means that God so loved *you* (John 3:16). So to receive God's gift, you, personally, must believe in his Son.

"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance!" John declared (Luke 3:8a). "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" (Luke 3:9). Christ died on the cross for our sins. As forgiven sinners, we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Yet genuine faith always results in good works (Eph. 2:8-10). Good works are the fruit of faith. Remember: repentance means change. And anyone who does not live life differently after Baptism or conversion, is not really a Christian. Every tree that doesn't bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Fire is a symbol of God's judgment and wrath. If you don't bear fruit, you will get axed and burn in hell for eternity.

Repentance is life change, not lip service. Repentance is not just teaching an old dog new tricks. Repentance means that God turns you into a completely different dog—I mean, person! *[Pause for laughter]*. That’s why when the crowds asked John, “What then shall we do?” in order to bear the fruit of repentance (v. 10), he gave them practical, down-to-earth advice. People with surplus must share with the poor and those in need (v. 11). We must do our jobs and carry out our callings (what Luther called *vocations*) without abusing our office or authority. John even adds, “Be content with your wages,” instead of complaining and raising a ruckus that you’re supposedly not paid enough (v. 14).

John does *not* say that you have to sell everything you own and give the money to the poor before walking off into the wilderness to become a hermit living alone in a cave somewhere. No! Life change doesn’t mean that you have to give up your job and your family. Life change means that you do them in a *new way*! God’s grace empowers us to glorify God and serve our neighbor in our vocation. Your classroom or boardroom becomes the very place where God wants you and needs you. His forgiveness frees you to become the person he created and always intended for you to be.

Repentance means change. But ultimately it is a change that only God can bring about. The Bible says, “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4). God wants to woo you with the Good News of his forgiveness, won by Jesus on the cross. But if you will not listen to that wonderful Word, he will instead wake you and up and shake you up with his Word of Law. Every year at Advent, John’s voice is still the one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” Christ is coming again someday. And there is only one way to be ready and prepared. Repent! In the name of Jesus, the coming King. Amen.