

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ 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? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ "I baptize you with ^[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² 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."

REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR

Don't you hate it when you get caught doing something wrong. The only thing worse than getting caught for doing something wrong might be living in fearful anticipation you will get caught. This is a horrible way for people to live and those who live this way will not do well on the day our Lord Jesus returns as Judge.

And so, "*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" We know John the Baptist. We knew John the Baptist before he was even born. We knew his parents and his birth story, but the qualification for John the Baptist to preach and to preach the way he did comes from the ancient prophecy of Isaiah who spoke of, "*A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'*" There was no one at the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem doing this kind of preparatory work. This kind of preparatory work is the preaching of the Law and the Gospel. There is nothing overly difficult with preaching the Law and the Gospel, but preaching the Law and the Gospel can become deadly when faithfully applying the Law and Gospel to the lives of people. Many OT prophets were martyred. John the Baptist would be martyred too. Other people flee from faithful preaching, but hold onto your jaws as I read verses five and six, "*People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.'*"

Earlier this week, I saw the breaking news of legendary actor Hugh Jackman serving up ice cream at Kopps Frozen Custard near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And the fine people of Wisconsin went out to Hugh Jackman. People were lined up a long ways on south 76th Street in what I call, "see your own breathe kind of weather," If you've ever had Kopps Frozen Custard you understand why the fine people of Wisconsin would stand in that line, but even here in the Fellowship Hall at Grace we can have a long line too. They won't make the news, but Karen Stuart, Deb Nutting and Ruth Lincoln are awesome and so are the cookies, and hot chocolate and coffee and other snacks too. There are many lines we must work our way through this time of year. And even if you shop online you are going to have to pay a pretty penny to jump ahead of other deliveries.

On the second Sunday of Advent, God's Word wants to make you aware of a more important line: the confessional line. The convenient feature of our confessional line at Grace is we can confess our sins to the great high priest all at the same time. Imagine if we had to confess our sins to Jesus individually. That would lengthen the service. Another pleasant feature of our confessional line at Grace is we can confess our sins to Jesus silently. All our sins are embarrassing and how wonderful it is to not have our sins printed on the pages of the Bible, but it wouldn't be a bad idea for Pastor Sellnow and me to start a line outside the pastor who serves us, our circuit pastor, Pastor John Sprain. And it wouldn't be a bad idea for you members of Grace to stand on the sidewalk of Palmaire Avenue and wait your turn to talk with Pastor Sellnow or me. Or for the children of our congregation to end each and every day with their parents about what went right and what went wrong.

And what would Pastor Sprain tell Pastors Sellnow and Jacobson. Hopefully the same thing we would tell you, "I as a called servant of the Word announce God's grace to you. And in the place and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, 'I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'"

The office time then would allow us to talk about what John the Baptist calls, *"fruit in keeping with repentance."* What is this fruit. Our writer Matthew keeps the confessional line very general, but Luke the evangelist captures John the Baptist speaking more specifically in his Gospel. John the Baptist talked directly to the tax collectors about collecting more than they were required and after washing away their sin, told the tax collectors not to do that. John the Baptist also talked directly to the soldiers about abusing their power for additional pay and after washing away their sin, told the soldiers to be content with their pay. The first fruit of repentance is to stop doing the sin you are repenting of. That's easier said than done, so you should talk about your sin to someone else.

Some time ago a man came into my office and talked about his anger. His anger was ruining his life and so I forgave his sin of anger and then I had him making weekly and bi-weekly visits so we could talk about anything that brought him anger during that time. Once in a while, there were some little things we talked about, but many of these weeks went by with nothing to report. Early detection was a key, but another key was knowing he had to self-report his behavior and he didn't want to report an angry episode so he didn't have any.

A second fruit of repentance is more challenging. It's the fruit of Zacheaus. It's the fruit of trying to make right what was done wrong so long ago. Our friend, Zacheaus was a tax-collector and cheated people of money. His fruit of repentance was to give half his money to the poor and pay four times the amount to anyone he had ever cheated. Like Zacheaus, we can't right the wrongs we have committed and restore completely what was broken, but a fruit in keeping with repentance is the catch all fruit. God's Word tells us, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Producing fruit in keeping with repentance is one of the things we do, and the reason we do it isn't so we might feel less guilty over what we have done. We produce fruit in keeping with repentance for the glory of God.

And this is the kingdom of heaven. This is the kingdom of heaven in the kingdom of heaven when the saints and angels always do what they do for God for his glory. This kingdom of heaven comes down to earth when we are sorry for sins, believe we are forgiven and with God's help faithful carry out our vocations or callings in life.

I haven't left a lot of time to talk about the alternative line, the line that is the alternative to "the confessing our sins and producing fruit in line with repentance" line. As Christians we don't need to pay that much attention to the alternative line because our goal as Christians is to be focused on fruit. And yet since we are at the same time still sinners, we should be aware of the alternative line and the ax at the root of the tree and the winnowing fork and the word of God that will be spoken to those who reject the gospel word.

The orchardman doesn't want to cut down any trees. Those trees that time to plant and to care for and it would be preferable if every tree that was planted would bare fruit instead of having to uproot and start over. The orchardman is not an impartial judge of his trees. The orchardman will give his unfruitful trees more time than he should and will try more strategies to save his unfruitful trees than he realistically should because maybe, just maybe, the next effort will work. The winnowing fork doesn't share the same feelings as the orchardman. The window-style fork is impartial. It's a tool that separates the wheat from the chaff. The wheat is more weighty than the chaff and falls to the ground. Likewise the chaff is lighter than the wheat and blows away. The wheat is valuable and stored in the barn. The chaff is worthless and like the unfruitful tree is gathered and burned in the fire.

Our God still has feelings for the unregenerate and wayward believers on this earth. And that's why you're still here. There is something worse than being caught doing something wrong. There is something worse than living in fearful anticipation for when you will get caught. What's worse is not hearing from a voice that will prepare you for Jesus' return as Judge. Welcomes these voices in your life and be this voice in the lives of others. God still raises and calls his people to be his voice in the home and in the church and in the world. Fathers, bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Pastors, prepare God's people for works of service. Children of God, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Amen.