

Second Sunday of Advent + December 4, 2022
Indiana-Kentucky Synod Sermon
Pr. Dan Forehand, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry Transition

Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 3rd chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

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Grace, mercy, and peace, be yours from the one for whom we wait, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

My name is Pastor Dan Forehand and I am the new Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry Transition here in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod. I am delighted to serve alongside of each of you as we live into our collective mission: empowering, equipping, and encouraging the people of God to make Christ known.

As we go deeper into this season of Advent, we encounter this familiar reading from Matthew's gospel. There is a lot here in this reading, so I wonder what jumps out to you? Is the familiar call to "prepare the way of the Lord?" Is it the unique character of John the Baptizer, wearing his camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey? Perhaps you are caught by John's strong words, "you brood of vipers!" Or maybe it's the promise of the coming Messiah who John says he is not worthy to carry his sandals.

There's a lot here, but to me, I noticed what seems like a small, but significant detail. In verse 7 we read, "But when John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism...". That's interesting. When we think of the Pharisees and the Sadducees we do not often think about them coming to John the Baptizer for baptism, but in Matthew's gospel, it's clear that they do.

Which begs the question: *Did John baptize them?*

John quickly calls them "a brood of vipers," which most of us take to be a pretty strong putdown. But a brood actually refers to the offspring. So in some ways, John is calling these individuals "baby vipers" or "child vipers." Which makes Jesus' words later in the 19th chapter of Matthew even more interesting when he says, "Let the little children and maybe the little vipers come to me." (19:14).

John the Baptizer calls the people to repentance at the beginning of our reading today and says that's the first step to the journey we're on. And these baby vipers, the Pharisees and the Sadducees stay in line. They still come. That makes me think that despite John's seemingly harsh words, *he still baptizes them.*

Because his harsh words aren't so much against them as individuals – again, as baby vipers, as they are to the system that they find themselves in. And, we, too, a couple thousand years later, I think understand this. We look at our society, our world, the church, and we see a lot that is corrupt and not life-giving. We all should own our responsibility on the journey and come to a place of repentance. And that is a free gift from God.

In our baptismal liturgy we make a commitment to live a different kind of life – a life of justice and mercy and peace and love and grace and hope – we denounce the devil and the ways of life that go against God's preferred vision for us. So, in some mysterious way, we continue the legacy of these Pharisees and Sadducees, who repented, stood in line to get baptized, were chastised by John and then heard some really amazing news.

Rejoice for you are a Pharisee! What good news!

Because John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but there is another one coming, who is even more powerful” (3:11). Pointing to Jesus and his baptism of renewal with fire, John shows the promise that though life may seem overwhelming and though overcoming the systems of racism, prejudice, injustice, and other evils may seem too high of a mountain to journey:

Hope is coming.

Love is coming.

Grace is coming.

Jesus is coming.

And all those are already here!

As I’ve begun to journey around the Synod and hear the ways that the people of God are responding to God’s calling, I see the beginning fruits of this happening. From laundry ministries to food trucks to compassionately listening and walking with our neighbors to teams that are helping us live more fully into our calling to stand for inclusion and racial and gender justice to congregations who dare to gather to share God’s Word even in these difficult times – through all of that, I begin to see that God is at work. That God has not forgotten us. That God is with us. That this renewing fire baptism that Jesus is bringing is here, in part, right now. Despite our shortcomings, despite the ways that we choose to ignore it, despite our tendencies to rely on the past instead of imagining God’s future before us.

People of God, the gift of baptism is for us. The promise of baptism is for us. I think it really matters that on that day, John invited these baby Pharisees and Saducees into a new relationship with their God. I think it really matters that today, Jesus invites us to see new springs bursting all around us. I think it really matters that today we remember our baptisms as we await the coming Messiah.

May we do so courageously, expectantly, and abundantly as we await the coming of the Messiah. May we light candles for hope. And may we know that God is with us always in all ways.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

As we prepare for the fullness of Christ's presence, let us pray for a world that yearns for new hope.

A brief silence.

God, you renew the church in every age. We give thanks for hymn writers and theologians who have given the church new ways to articulate the power of Jesus. Inspire teachers, writers, and musicians to delight and instruct your people. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You give us a vision of creation in harmony, when hurting and destruction will be no more. Teach us to be stewards of the earth and companions to its creatures. Restore to balance and wholeness what human greed has harmed. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You defend the cause of all who are poor and oppressed. Raise up leaders who will govern with equity and serve the common good. Guide judges, lawmakers, and public officials to protect the rights of those who cannot advocate for themselves. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You deliver those in need from suffering and fear. Come to the aid of any who are exploited or abused, especially children, elders, and victims of human trafficking. Provide safety and help to our neighbors without shelter, refugees, and those fleeing violence. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You urge your people to welcome one another as you have welcomed us. Nurture ministries of hospitality and care throughout this Synod. We pray for people who are homebound, hospitalized, or separated from loved ones (*especially those we name aloud or in our hearts*). God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You have called us to be your people. We give you thanks for the congregations and mission centers of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod. Guide all of us as we seek to share the love of Jesus in our work and play. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You embrace all who have died trusting in your promises, and we give thanks for their faithful witness. Sustain us in hope until we are united with them in the joy of your eternal presence. God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of our longing, you know our deepest needs. By your Spirit, gather our prayers and join them with the prayers of all your children. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Hear us now Father, as we pray the words that Christ has taught us,

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

Blessing

God the eternal Word,
who dwells with us in Jesus,
and who holds us in the grace of the Holy Spirit,
✠ bless you now and forever.

Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Christ is near.

Thanks be to God.

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