



Advent 2, Year A

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The Second Sunday of Advent: Gospel Text – Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This 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.’ ”

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

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, ⁹ and do 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. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

SERMON TEXT:

Grace, mercy, and peace from the One for whom we wait, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

My name is Pastor Dan Forehand and I serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Emerging Ministers and Ministries in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod. I bring you greetings from our Bishop Timothy Graham, the rest of our Synod Staff, and the 168 congregations and 8 campus ministries that make up our mission territory. Thank you for taking part in the Sermon Supply and joining me for worship today.

20 years ago, Staples, the office supply store, started a new ad campaign with a red button that had the word "Easy" on it. When the button was pushed a friendly voice would say "That was easy" and magically would solve whatever problem the person had. It was a very successful campaign and many people bought these "easy" buttons - hoping that it would solve all their problems. And, maybe for a few people it did.

And while an “Easy” button might be tempting, there’s another button that I would prefer to have. In certain conversations, in certain interactions, in certain relationships, on certain days, I would like a “reset” button. A button that would allow the unnecessarily heated conversation to start over. A button that would allow the misunderstood relationship to begin again. A button that would just allow me to start a day over that just didn’t start right.

That button doesn’t exist, but we are offered a gift that is just as helpful, that is the gift of repentance. Repentance? You might ask. How is that a gift? John the Baptist, in this gospel reading today from Matthew, is calling people a ‘brood of vipers.’ How could it possibly be, then, that repentance is a gift?

Repentance or the root word “repent” involves change. It involves turning away. It involves changing direction. It involves transformation. Repentance requires change. And while change can be hard, change can also be that reset that we need.

And Jesus knows this. Jesus offers us the great gift of repentance. And, Jesus walks alongside of us in this journey of resetting and repenting and reimagining what our lives could look like and how repenting might just make our lives a little bit better and fuller and more beautiful and more gracious. Jesus invites us to look differently at our own lives and the life of the world around us and to wonder what might be eager to change. What might be longing to be reset. What might benefit from a little bit of transformation.

There may be no better time to do that re-imagining than right now in the season of Advent. This season where we wait, watch, and wonder together. Where we wait for the promise of a baby in the manger. This season where we watch as the world grows darker as we get closer to the winter solstice and see what God might birth from the darkness. This Advent where we wonder at the marvels of God who can do and who does incredible things. This Advent season invites us to slow down as the world says speed up. This Advent season invites us to look for the miracles all around us. And this Advent season invites us to repent.

Because often times, as we repent, we see that Jesus gives us yet another gift – the gift of forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness flow together out of the goodness of God. This gift of forgiveness then empowers and enables and inspires us to go out into the world and to live the new lives as a person who has been transformed, freed, and forgiven. Jesus gives this forgiveness freely. Not because we repent, not connected to the quality of our repentance or anything else. It's a free gift. And, at the same time, I see the gift of forgiveness in my own life in a more powerful and wonderful way when it is accompanied by my repentance.

So maybe here's a practice that you could try. Take a quick inventory of your life. What are your priorities? What matters to you? What is pushing you into a new understanding of God and God's love for you? What is distracting you from waiting, watching, and wondering for the gift of Jesus in this Advent season? There are days that this is really easy for me to name. There are days that this is a lot harder for me to name. There are days that I am just too busy to do such an inventory and perhaps in

that there's an invitation from the Spirit to think otherwise, too. But, wherever you may be, find something that is distracting you from Jesus. That one thing that is pushing you away from the person that you believe God is calling you to be, as you were called in the waters of baptism. Name it. And say a simple prayer asking God to help you repent. Something like, "Lord Jesus, free me from my worry." Or "Lord Jesus, help me to turn away from a love of money." Or, "Lord Jesus, show me your ways and help me to be freed of the need to be right and powerful and liked."

And, maybe in that prayer, you can thank God for the gift of forgiveness too. It's not a magic red button that will immediately reset everything and make it right. It may actually make life a bit more challenging for a season or so as you struggle to turn. We're a lot like ships - we can't repent and turn away that fast - we need some time to make that transformation. But we're also on this journey together. This Advent adventure where we light candles, where we sing songs, where we wait for miracles and trust that those miracles will come to us as well.

Maybe you've always heard "repent" as a command of judgment or wrongdoing. And maybe it is. Maybe you're in a good place and wouldn't consider yourself to be a part of the "brood of vipers." I imagine John the Baptist would have some choice words for me. Choice words that are said because he knows there is a better way. So this Advent, I hear the command to repent as a word of grace and an invitation from Jesus to see something new. To prepare for something amazing. To be embraced by God and freed from the ways that I get stuck in that lead to pain and sadness. To imagine with the Spirit what this all

could look like and to seek my place as a forgiven, beloved, and saintly child of God in that world.

Friends, may we all embrace what God will reveal to us this Advent. May we be filled with hope and laughter for the ways that God is transforming our lives. May we share joy and freedom at the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation. May we be overwhelmed by the love of God that is freely given to us. And may we repent. And see how God will walk with us in that journey of transformation.

A blessed Advent to you. May we wait, watch, and wonder for Jesus is here and Jesus is coming in new and powerful ways.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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