

“Why Repent?”

St. Matthew tells us that “In those days John the Baptist came” – “came” because God sent him. God sends preachers. He sent Isaiah the prophet in the Old Testament – He sent John the Baptist in the days of Jesus – and He sends His preachers to you today. None of this is happenstance. God sent John to prepare the way of the Lord – to prepare the way for Jesus.

John came preaching “in the wilderness” – and when one is out in the wilderness – something is not right. The wilderness is not a place to gather – it’s a place to get through (as quickly as possible). The wilderness is a place of desolation, and danger – and for God’s people of old – where they learned to depend on the Lord.

That’s where we find ourselves, wandering through the wilderness of this world. Something is not right. Like Israel of old – this is not where we are supposed to be – we are supposed to be in the Promised Land. But here we are – and so the Lord sends a preacher.

John preaches the same sermon that has been preached since the fall into sin – “repent.” We hear this so often that we hear it – but we don’t. We know how the words go so we hardly pay attention to them. But John’s sermon has a little twist. “Repent, FOR the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Repent! WHY? Because Jesus is here! The mightier One is here. The One who burns up the chaff with fire is here.

[P] Are you repentant? [P] You repented during the Confession and Absolution, right? Now, I want you to imagine that it is the Last Day and Jesus comes again in all His glory, and you are standing before the seat of judgment. Is your repentance different than it was just a little while ago?

When John the Baptist preached repentance, Jesus was right on his heels. Those who heard John would shortly stand before Jesus – and hear the same sermon – “repent.” And so it is today. You stand before the mightier One who seeks your repentance.

It seems like the whole world has gone out to John – “Jerusalem and ALL Judea and All the region of the Jordan.” After all, he is the promised forerunner of the Christ – one like Elijah – a voice crying out in the wilderness. But it is the Lord who is gathering His people – so that they might be cleansed – so that, confessing their sins, they might be forgiven.

It’s as we confess in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, GATHERS, enlightens and sanctifies the whole church on earth ...”

Also coming for baptism were many of the Pharisees and Sadducees – the churchly folks, the religious – doing what they were supposed to be doing. And John the Baptist smiles and says, “glad to see you”? “Welcome”? NO! “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

These words ought to strike all churchly-types who come to be cleansed by God without confessing their sins. What about you? Do you bear fruit that comes with repentance? To answer that, we first need to know what it means to “repent.”

Literally it means to “change ... mind” – but before you think of this as simply an attitude adjustment – or a mere thought process – it’s much more than that.

It means to think about sin the way God thinks about sin – and to think about the forgiveness of sins the way God thinks about forgiveness. It means to believe what God says regarding sin and forgiveness. Repentance, you see, is not something that comes from ourselves – but something that God works in us through His Word.

To “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” is first of all, to stand before God and confess our sins – to confess that we deserve God’s wrath to be poured out on us. It is to confess that we are dependent sinners who need a Savior – that without Christ’s blood cleansing all our iniquity – we too would be consumed with an unquenchable fire.

With the mind of Christ – we believe His Word and it bears fruit in our lives. All attempts to justify ourselves – to depend on our credentials to escape the wrath – all of that is put away so that we might trust only in Christ’s holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death for our redemption.

Repentance bears the fruit of good works. We live according to the Ten Commandments – not only because God threatens to punish all who break these commandments, and therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them – but also, because He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments.

And as we walk through the wilderness of this world – and we go astray from the Lord and His will for our lives – again, He calls us to repentance – restoring us to His ways – reminding us that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Indeed, Jesus is at hand – Jesus is with you. He hears your confession and absolves you. He cleanses you in the waters of Holy Baptism. He preaches His life-giving Word you’re your ears. He gives His resurrected Body and Blood into your mouth.

This is the “kingdom of heaven” right here on earth. Jesus, ruling over you – over your sin and death – with His grace and forgiveness.

Dearly beloved, God has raised you up as the children of Abraham – as heirs of the promise. He leads you through the wilderness of this world – ruling over your life – until that day when He delivers you, once and for all, from the wrath to come – and brings you into the Promised Land of heaven. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.