

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ²and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” ³For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

Prepare the way for the Lord;

make his paths straight!^[a]

⁴Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

⁷When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore produce fruit consistent with ^[b]repentance. ⁹And don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with ^[c]water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove ^[d]his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out.” (CSB)

Out of Place?

There are some things that you just don’t expect to find in a manger scene. And yet, some cultures find it necessary to add a caganer aka the crapper. This squatting figure is found hidden somewhere in the scene, doing what we all know how to do. Yes it’s fairly easy to see that one of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn’t belong. However if you take a quick glance you’ll might miss it, but a longer look might find something out of the ordinary, tucked away behind the nativity, under a bridge, or behind a tree you’ll find him or her.

In a similar fashion John looks like he is a little out of place in the Christmas story. “*Who warned you... brood of vipers?*” During the Advent season, John gives us the first Yo Momma joke on record and then instead of peace and quiet, snow filled scenes, you’ve got this homeless looking doomsday prophet preaching hellfire and brimstone in the middle of nowhere. Should we take him seriously?

Is this really what we need to hear before Christmas? Should we honestly take time out of our Christmas season to see this? The answer is yes. Before we receive the greatest gift God has to offer in the incarnation, the God becoming flesh, we have to know why he has come. He has come to forgive our sin and unless you realize your need to repent you can’t properly receive this gift. John calls both those who have repented and those who think they have no need to repent to repent. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “*Repent!*” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of

believers to be one of repentance (1st of Martin Luther's 95 Theses). Repent: Something is out of place. God is Here – His kingdom has come.

The scene starts out in the wilderness. John has taken the awkward approach to evangelism. When Paul began to preach he went to the cities and the word filtered its way to the surrounding countryside. But John goes to the middle of nowhere an in-hospitable place, a place you don't want to be, and he sets up shop there. It's the Exodus all over again. This is Israel reduced down to one in Jesus. We can say John lives there by looking at his clothing and food. Camel skin clothing was the cheapest of clothing available. So it's fair to say John wasn't into fashion. He dressed like Elijah the prophet. He ate locust, wild honey, and preached, "*Repent for the Kingdom of God is near.*"

What exactly is that repentance? John links repentance and baptism together with the forgiveness of sins. Repentance and faith are used interchangeably. Faith in Jesus is repentance and repentance is faith in Jesus. Repentance is literally a change of mind. Formerly I thought one way but now I think another way. It is a recognition that we need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins because we are filthy sinners in need of forgiveness. The best way to describe it is to look at Scripture and see those who are repentant and those who are not. In Genesis 3 which we heard at our Advent service of lessons and carols, Adam is confronted in his sin. What does he say? "*The woman you put here with me, she gave to me and I ate.*" That doesn't sound like repentance. That sounds like an excuse our children give for why they did what they weren't supposed to do, "It was an accident." Lord, it's not really my fault. It was her fault and ultimately yours because you put her here with me. Let's try another in 1 Samuel 15 Saul is instructed to "*attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them.*" But when he returns, King Agag is alive, along with the best of the sheep, cattle, fat calves, and lambs. And when confronted Saul responds, "*The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.*" Once again there is no repentance, only flimsy excuses for disobedience. Later Saul admits, "*I have sinned,*" but he doesn't stop there he continues, "*I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord.*" And Samuel responded, "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the Word of the Lord."

Samuel saw right through the "repentance" of Saul and John can see right through the repentance of these Pharisees and Sadducees. They came out to see what was going on in the wilderness. They came out to see what was up with this new preacher. They came but they didn't come to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, because as far as they were concerned, they had no need to repent. John sees right through their charade and calls out to them, "Who warned you?"

Our setting is different, our time is different, our situation is different. We've been baptized. We've confessed our sins (we just did 20 minutes ago). We come in repentance. So does that mean we have no need for repentance? Some things in life change, others things in life are more constant in the life of a Christian. "Repentance continues until death. For through one's entire life, repentance contends with the sin remaining in the flesh. If ever we arrive at the point of un-

repentance, no sorrow over sin, no struggle against sin, but instead we find a willful and unrepentant person – we're no longer Christian. We're just fooling ourselves, like the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Smalcald Articles put it this way, "*When holy people – still having and feeling original sin and daily repenting and striving against it – happen to fall into manifest sins (as David did into adultery, murder, and blasphemy), then faith and the Holy Spirit have left them. The Holy Spirit does not permit sin to have dominion to gain the upper hand so it can be carried out, but represses and restrains it from doing what it wants. If sin does what it wants, the Holy Spirit and faith are not present.*" (Smalcald Articles P. 278)

Where none of these happen, there is no Christian and that is scary. Those who have not repented are warned of one who comes who will baptize with the spirit and with fire. He will thoroughly clear the threshing floor. There won't be single kernel that isn't threshed. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with Fire. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit sounds like a good thing, and it is. But being baptized with fire, is what happened to those in Sodom when fire fell from the sky and consumed them. John warned, "*The axe is already at the foot of the tree, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*" Any tree that is not bearing the fruit, any Christian not producing the works of a Christian will find the same result. Repent.

But there is good news because the way Christians are made Christian and stay Christian is through the Word preached both in the Law as it confronts sin and the Gospel as it tells us what our Savior has done. The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God, the words of John which also happen to be the words of Jesus, who preached the same message.

There was a message of judgment but there was also the promise that Christ has come to forgive and bring new life in those he saves. That is why God came down into this world, to save sinners. That's why the caganer is fairly accurate portrayal of what we bring to God. The caganer is a picture of us. Rich or poor, it doesn't matter, everybody does it. We're all in need of a savior. There isn't a thing we can give to God. It's not our heart that is a thing of beauty, we bring our problems, our mess, and he takes it upon himself. Although John proclaims he is not worthy to carry his sandals or touch his feet, Jesus would allow mere men to nail him to the cross, driving nails through his feet. In what would appear to be God's greatest failure and yet it would accomplish his greatest deliverance. He became the solution to sin by taking sin upon himself and paying the price for it. It is through him that we receive the forgiveness of sins, life, salvation and that results in joy, peace, unity – Repentance.

An example of repentance is evident in David who fell from the faith, committed willful and unrepentant sin, slept with his neighbor's wife, got her pregnant, tried to hide the situation by bringing her husband home from war for a few nights, got him drunk and sent him home, and eventually sent him back to war with his own death sentence. It's clear that David was not repentant until God's prophet Nathan confronted him. You've done these things! And David replies, "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" No excuses, nothing but a simple confession. *Nathan responds to David, "The LORD himself has put away your sin. You will not die."* As soon as the prophet left David

pens Psalm 51 a beautiful confession of his contribution to salvation: nothing. Only the sin that needed saving. Jesus came into this world to save sinners.

Not worthy of anything. Not because of who we are by birth. It's not because of our parents, your church membership. It is because of him. That means we are forgiven for all the times we've thought there was something in us better, or that merits salvation any more than anyone else. We are forgiven and called to live a new life in Christ, different, because his kingdom is here, now.

In Jesus' victory over sin on the cross God's reign in this world is made known. In the resurrection Jesus has broken the powers of death. In pouring out his Holy Spirit in baptism and in his word we have been set free to live under a new order, the Reign of God. And in this kingdom and under his reign we receive the same body that he has given to us to reassure us that your sins are indeed without a doubt forgiven. God rules in our hearts and lives as we repent.

Repentance isn't about being naughty or nice. It's about admitting who we are and realizing who he is. It's about confessing our sin and rejoicing in repentance because repentance doesn't stop with merely feeling sorry for our sins and doing wrong. It results in a changed life. It rejoices in forgiveness. In so doing we are ready to greet our king who comes in humility, in a feeding trough, to an unwed teen without a place to call her own.

So what's more out of place, the caganer or our God? He shouldn't have had to come down, but realizing that there was no hope that we could save ourselves, he did what was impossible for us. He saved us. Yes he's out of place. The nativity is out of place for any king but even more out of place for our God, and yet that is exactly where we need to see him. That is exactly where he came to save. Amen.