

"REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND".

In his story "The Emperor's New Clothes," Hans Christian Anderson tells of the king so fond of new clothes that he was easy prey for two swindlers posing as tailors. He paid the swindlers a large sum of money to make him a suit of clothes from their magnificent fabric, the finest imaginable. You know the story – there really wasn't any fabric at all; the swindlers were just pretending to make clothes for the empire. The day came when the swindlers even pretended to dress the emperor in his new clothes. "The pattern; those cooler; It is a magnificent outfit,' he heard from his noblemen." Through the streets the emperor went, more proudly than ever. "How fine are the emperor's new clothes," the people in the streets cried. Nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything until a little child said, "But he hasn't got anything on."

That little boy who went against the grain and cried that the emperor didn't have any clothes on could relate to John the Baptist. John proclaimed the truth, that we are sinners and in need of a Savior. John's message to them was the message of Advent, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand".

So that there is no misunderstanding of what repentance is, let me clearly state what repentance is. Repentance is sorrow for their sins and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as one's Savior. Repentance is not just being sorry. Or especially, sorry that you got caught. And, repentance is not something you do, a decision of the will, or a conclusion of the mind. Repentance is God's work in you. God, through His Word, causes you to see your sin and sorrow over it and God, through that same Word, works

faith in you so that you may believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

I. The Emperor didn't see his nakedness. So that we can see the uncleanness and the shame of our sin, God works through the Word of the Law to show us our sin.

You know the Law: Fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God. Remember the Sabbath Day. Honor those in authority over you. Do not murder. Honor marriage. Don't take your neighbor's stuff. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor. Don't covet your neighbor's stuff.

You may well know the Law, but you don't like the Law one bit. And here's why: the Law exposes your guilt, your shame, your self-centeredness, your selfishness, your total disdain for the will of God and all the time you've ignored your neighbor. The Law tells you that you worry, stew, and fret. You trust in lady luck, rather the promises of God's Word. You do not love and cherish those in authority over you, especially when it comes to something you don't like -- like the speed limit. Oh, yes, you don't end your neighbor's life or hurt them in their body because you would go to jail if you did that; but, BUT, you sure stay angry at your neighbor and refuse to forgive. Marriage, the lifelong union of one man and one woman? Yeh, right. Helping your neighbor with their property? Who has time for that? Oh, yes, and gossip, telling juicy tidbits about your neighbor. May as well just tear that out; no one cares your neighbor's good name and reputation anymore. And, coveting? Oh my! It just seems like we can't live without being angry, jealous, and envious.

Luther wrote in his hymn, "The law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light." The law shows us our sin. And, we don't like it. The mirror of the Law shows us that no matter how hard we try, no matter how

good we may think we are, we have sinned in thoughts, words, and deeds and deserve only God's temporal and eternal punishment.

And, we remember our Lord's words, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor," Jesus said, "but the sick (Mt 9)." The Law drives us to our knees, to pray, "Lord, be merciful unto me, a sinner!"

II. God, through the Word of the Gospel, produces faith, which trusts in Christ.

John, that "voice of one calling in the desert," prepared the way for the Lord by preaching the Word and only the Word. God the Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring God's kingdom into your heart. The Spirit causes the kingdom to come into your heart when He, through this Word of Law, empties your hearts and pulls down your idols and lays bear your sin and reveals the utter futility of your life apart from Christ. The Law, showing us our sins, prepares the way for Christ to come in.

The Law prepares the way for Christ to come in through the Word of the Gospel, that Word of Life which produces faith, faith which trusts, rejoices, and finds comfort in Christ alone, that Root of Jesse, who reconciled us to God by taking our sin upon His own body and bearing God's wrath against that sin, including the death of our sin.

"They were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." My Dear Christian Friends, that is the release God provides, your God-given escape from the coming wrath. In your Baptism, the Holy Spirit works faith in you, faith that clings to Christ so that you become one with Christ, in death and in His resurrection, so that wrath of God's judgment of death and hell have no hold on you.

III. Now, alive in Christ, God, again through His Word, produces the fruits of repentance within you. So, I ask you: Where are the fruits of repentance

in your life?

Last week, we heard Paul's words, "Let us put aside the deeds of darkness." Let me say it again -- our behavior is to be noticeably different from the behavior of those who have no faith in Christ. Our behavior is to be noticeably different from what is accepted and even popular in our world today. Or, maybe I should say -- it should be different; it is supposed to be different. The old Adam in us is supposed to be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires in the water of our baptism, but the Old Adam swims so very well. So, Repent, John says.

Sometimes, we mistakenly think of repentance as a one-time thing, like graduating from high school. However, what John really is saying in our Gospel would be better translated into English as "Be repenting! Be continually repentant!" This is the same truth Luther stated in the first of his 95 Reformation Theses, "The Christian life is the life of repentance."

Repentance, Luther writes in our Large Catechism, is nothing more than a daily return to the waters of our baptism. Drown your defiant flesh with all of its unholy lusts and desires, so that God may raise you to new life in Christ.

Through His Word, God will strengthen and keep in that faith He began at your baptism. He breathes His Word of forgiveness into you and joins that Word to bread and wine to give you grace to produce fruits in keeping with repentance. You now produce good fruit -- fruit in keeping with repentance -- because God produces that fruit in you. God works in you, so that He may do His work to your neighbor through you.

Think of it this way: how many of you have ever had apple pie? Where did the apples for that pie come from? An apple tree. My point is this: the apple tree does not produce apples for its enjoyment and benefit.

The apple tree produces apples for its neighbor to eat and enjoy. Like the apple tree, God produces the fruits of repentance in us, so that our good works, our fruits, may serve our neighbor, for their good and benefit.

That means we do trust in God's will for us, even when it makes no sense to our human reason. You don't cross your fingers for good luck, you fold your hands in prayer. You do come to worship on Sunday because it is here that God feeds and strengthens your faith. You do your homework, because that is what God instructs you to do through those who have authority over you. You do forgive as God has forgiven you in Christ. You don't find humor in off-color jokes because you honor marriage. You do help your neighbor shovel the snow out of their driveway. You explain your neighbor's actions in the kindest way. And you are happy and content with the life God has given you.

This is why our prayer this Advent Sunday is, "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds."