

Advent 2 12/4/22
Matthew 3:1-2 A

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

Just about everything we buy today comes with a warning. Some of them are necessary – like the warning that comes with the chainsaw: do not attempt to stop chain with hand. I think that it a mistake you would not care to make even once. Other warnings seem unnecessary, even ridiculous, honestly. Clothes irons warn us not to use them while wearing the article of clothing we are ironing. I suppose that would save time, but not a good idea. And, my personal favorite warning label of all time – the one you see on your coffee cup that reads: “caution, contents are hot” – I hope so, that’s why I’m drinking it. Why do so many products carry these seemingly unnecessary warning labels? Because someone, somewhere probably harmed themselves by using the product in a manner it was not designed for – and paid the price for it. That’s why so many products advise us that we ignore the warning at their own risk. This morning John the Baptist has an Advent Warning for us, and it especially so is one that we ignore at our own risk.

John’s Advent message is this, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. To which we ask that Lutheran question: What does this mean? What is repentance? 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 trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

The Evangelist tells us, “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (vv. 5-6).

But, not all who came to John were baptized by him, confessing their sins. When many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came, John said to them,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear fruit good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (vv. 7-10).

Why did John speak these words? Because they were not confessing their sins – far from it, they thought they had no sin. And, they didn’t believe in Jesus for forgiveness, because they didn’t need a Savior; they believed God was pleased with them because of who they were and what they did. And the way they lived their lives showed what they believed – they were just better than most, and they flaunted it.

What about you? What is your reaction to John’s call to repent? The law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light. So, you’re ok with a little law, even some fire and brimstone in the sermon, as long as it’s directed at the ills of the world, the sickness and depravity of our society, the dark and ugly sins of politicians and celebrities. Instead of seeing ourselves as we are by our natures before God, we just feel good about ourselves inside when compare ourselves to other people, and compared to most, you look pretty good. You don’t lead an outwardly, obviously sinful life, and you’re Lutheran. If God is pleased with anyone, it should be you, right?

I call that to your attention, because it's easy to become a Pharisee; to not see your sin. The Law calls upon you to fear, love, and trust in God above all things; but you worry and stew and fret. You trust in lady luck, rather than 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 would never 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. You have no problem decrying same-sex marriage, and rightly so; but in the next breath you laugh hysterically at an off-color joke. Helping your neighbor with their property? Who has time for that? Oh, yes, and gossip, telling juicy tidbits about your neighbor; you feel good inside when you do that. And, coveting? Oh my! It could be argued anger, jealousy, and envy are what define our age.

The law shows us our sin. And, we don't like it one bit. 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 as we ourselves confess -- deserve only God's temporal and eternal punishment.

Seeing our sin, we are driven to repentance, "Lord, be merciful unto me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13)!

John said to the crowd, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I" (v. 11). The Promised One did come, born of virgin mother. He accomplished His mission of salvation. And He did it by being circumcised on the 8th day and taking our place under God's law and living a life of perfect obedience. He endured rejection from the very people he came to save. As a lamb before its shearers is silent, He was silent when the rulers

of Israel unjustly convicted and condemned him to death. He willingly took our place on the cross and endured the hell our sins deserved. He crushed Satan's head and triumphed over death by stepping out of the tomb on Easter morning. Everything that Jesus came to do – He did, and because He did, we are forgiven all our sins.

Now, He **clears the threshing floor** of this world; separating penitent believers from stubborn, impenitent unbelievers. Wherever God's Word – His Law and Gospel – are proclaimed, that separation is taking place. Right here, right now today, Jesus is busy gathering His wheat to Himself.

He called and gathered you to Himself in the new birth of your Baptism. There, in water and Word, Jesus made you His own child. And, He continues to call and gather you to Himself as you hear and learn His Word, as you eat and drink His true Body and Blood. In these means, Jesus is at work, forgiving you your sins, strengthening and keeping you in the faith He began at your Baptism so that you do walk by faith.

Through these means, God renews you in Christ, so that you do "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8). You do rejoice and find comfort in Jesus. You forgive as Jesus has forgiven you. You patiently bear with your neighbor, as God patiently deals with you, in your weakness. In faith, you do trust the promises of God's Word, no matter what your feelings and the world tell you. You do not allow the sun to go down on your anger, but seek to live at peace with everyone. You explain everything, especially about your neighbor, in the kindest and best way. And, you are content, with the life and stuff, God has entrusted to you.

Yes, My Dear Friends in Christ, there are some warnings that we can afford to ignore; some we can even laugh at. John's warning, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," is not one we dare ignore. That's why

we despair of our own works and trust in Jesus. That's why we have such joy this Christmas season, and so look forward to celebrating our Lord's birth at Christmas.