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St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
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Pastor Ted Barthels  
Sermon preached on  
December 15, 2013  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-10; Romans 2:12-16  
Hymns: 69; 61; 63; 313:1

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'" 4 Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when 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 wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (NKJV)

This is the Word of God!

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.  
Amen.

In Christ, our coming Savior, dear fellow Redeemed.

INTRO: The ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is an important figure in our Christian religion yet today. Every year we revisit his ministry as we approach Christmas. We have a number of hymns that reference John and his message of preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God. One would think that we would all have a good grasp on what John was really all about. However, especially when it comes to things spiritual it is a part of our human condition that we alter our views of events in history, and not only in world history, but also in our personal histories. We also have a tendency to procrastinate, or downright forget the things that we are uncomfortable about taking care of.

The world may not know it, but John was a central figure in world history. John was a figure that is still important for us in our lives. He was the one God would send before the Messiah with a message of preparation, a message of repentance. Even with our remembrance of these facts about John we are still very likely to slip in our grasp of certain aspects of his mission, So the Spirit would guide us today to a better understanding of --

**THEME: John the Baptist's Message:**

**What is it Really All About?**

**I. It is NOT about the Externals, but Rather Confession.**

Look at John as he is described in our text.

**Matthew 3:4-6** Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

He certainly attracted the crowds! Large numbers of people came out to see John and to listen to him, and it wasn't like he was just down the block, or even in the next town. He was out in the middle of nowhere, and it wasn't convenient at all to go and hear him, and yet the people went out. Later, Jesus addressed the reason why this happened.

**Matthew 11:7-10** As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'

Jesus covers a lot of ground here. Certainly there were some who had claimed that John was "much to do about nothing." He was a passing fad of no real importance, "**a reed shaken in the wind.**" That was not true of John the Baptist. Neither was he a fancy showman known for fancy tricks or a spectacular appearance that impressed people. Those type of people stay in kings' courts.

**John's message wasn't about externals.**

That is an important point for us to remember as well. Since John's message still applies to us today. It wasn't about the externals then, and it still **isn't about externals** today. It isn't about large church buildings or fancy auditoriums. It isn't about preacher who wear fine clothing, or have the appealing style of worship, or the every conceivable program to cover every segment of the local population. What the Lord Jesus observed about John is what John's message still means for us today. He is a prophet, and more than a prophet! We need to pay attention to what he IS about!

People came to be baptized by him in the Jordan River, **confessing their sins**. John's message was about effectively dealing with sin. Sin can't be ignored. It doesn't just go away. There is no statute of limitations before divine justice, even for those offenses we might consider to be minor. They are not of "little or no consequence." They are of **great** consequence and must be confessed and dealt

with in a manner which the Lord presents to us through His prophet.

Once again as we consider the words of John the Baptist we see that his message --

**II. is NOT about Social Status,  
but rather about Proper Fruits.**

A lot of different people came out to John and sought his spiritual counsel for their lives. In responding to people he was very frank and honest. He never sugar coated his answers. He told them where they were wrong, and how they had correct their lives. The social status of his audience really didn't matter to John. He said what had to be said.

**Matthew 3:7-10** But when 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 wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

He was hard on these members of the highest social order among the Jews. These were the men that were most admired and respected by the Jewish people. But John's words aren't spoken out of spite or jealousy because they had more status in society than he had. They were spoken to shake them out of the false assurance of salvation they had because of their works. They were spoken to wake the people of that land to see the emptiness of a spiritual philosophy which depended upon religious observance and the works of the law, and not upon the grace of God in Christ.

There was also a false notion the people of the Jews had a right to eternal life simply because they had descended from Abraham. They needed to understand that didn't make them special. God could make children of Abraham from the stones lying about on the ground if He so desired. What they needed to understand was that God doesn't look for religious formalism, but **genuine fruits**

**of faith.** All the things they held to with such fervor and pride would get them nothing in the end. And judgment was to be seen as imminent!

This remains a great and important message for us. A perfect record of church attendance or the fact that one is a third generation church member, doesn't gain one any advantage.

Procrastination can be a dangerous thing. Spiritual procrastination can have eternal implications, indeed eternal consequences. One dare not go through life thinking "Later, I can take care of things spiritual later! I'll repent later. Right now isn't convenient, I need to take care of worldly affairs and associations first, and then **later** I'll still have plenty of time for the Lord."

John's message for the Scribes and Pharisees is a message for us also; "**Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance**" (v.8). To bear fruits worthy of repentance one must actually understand the **nature of true repentance**. The gospel doesn't issue free passes to sin all one wants. The gospel calls for repentance. Repentance is more than feeling bad or a little ashamed about what we have done, or are doing, or are going to do tomorrow, because we already made plans, or we know that sin is going to be there because it is just too convenient, and easy to get away with. True repentance doesn't accommodate sin!

True fruits of repentance begin in a heart that comprehends the wonder of what Jesus has done for us. He came into this world and suffered, He suffered for us! He died for US. He was cursed for us because **we** sinned! Faith not only clings to this truth, but cherishes this truth, and serves the Lord Jesus who did **all** for us and our salvation. Faith leads us to despise sin, and to turn away from sin. Repentance leads us to depend solely upon the merits of Christ for peace with God. Repentance leads us to live to the glory of our Savior in all things, and not for personal gratification in anything. We love because He first loved us. In all things Christ is to be glorified! In all things we show our love and reverence for Christ. In all behavior the love of Christ, and our love for Christ is evident. In all, things we shall love our neighbor even as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us!

John set the example for us. He saw that he should decrease and that in all things Christ should increase. He lived in lowliness, and yet boldly for Christ. John's message for the world --

### **III. IS all about Jesus and the Wonder of His Grace.**

**Matthew 3:11-12** I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The baptism of John was a wonderful thing. It was a washing away of sins, even as the baptism which we receive today according to Christ's command washes away our sin. John wasn't dismissing his baptism as being insignificant. Indeed it was a great blessing of grace. John brought a special assurance of forgiveness and peace to people who came in faith, desiring to be cleansed of the guilt and condemnation of their sin. John's ministry possessed a message of great and wonderful grace. However the greatest grace John spoke of was that which was to be found in Christ. He spoke of the wonder Jesus would bring in the baptism of the Spirit.

We see the fulfillment of this prophecy in the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and how the age of the Holy Spirit began in Jerusalem, and how the gospel went forth into all lands that the people of every language might receive the message of God's grace. This would be the greatest and most powerful work of God. This set the stage for Christ's return when He will gather His wheat into the barn.

But this is where we hear John talking once again in very plain language, one might say almost harsh language. The reality of the situation and the seriousness with which all people are to regard things spiritual had to be communicated lest as the years go by people become careless with the gospel, and when that day arrives find themselves unprepared for the Lord's coming. On that day Jesus will come and He will gather His wheat into the barn, that is, He will gather all believers to Himself as the harvest of the saints and deliver them into the everlasting safety and glory of heaven. It

is our prayer, and our **sure hope** that we will be found among that number of the blessed. That is the message of grace that is found in John's message.

However, John also spoke of the other side of the Lord's work upon His return. He will sweep the thrashing floor. It will be made clean. All the chaff will be burned in the fire. You know what the chaff is don't you? It's the empty shells and other waste that used to be around the grain of wheat. It may still look like wheat but it is nothing but waste that is fit to be thrown out and burned. May we not be found among that number! It is only by the grace of God in Christ that we are not there. Treasure that fact! Don't ever forget the truth of our natural condition, and how tragic it would be for us, or for our children or our grandchildren if we let this grace slip away. Generational slip in the truth of God has been a part of history from the very beginning of time. It is no different now. The only way to avoid it is to stay in the Word and keep --

**Conclusion:** Applying the Message John the Baptist to our Lives.

Of course we have done this already in our lives, however this is a message that needs to be heard again and again. This is an exercise of faith that needs to be repeated time throughout the year, and not only during this Advent season. Advent is an especially important time for us to do some spiritual introspection in the light of the message of John the Baptist for a couple of good reasons. The first is that we are approaching the Christmas festival, and we need to prepare for the observance of that event in a proper spiritual way for our personal benefit as well as for our children. I heard on the TV yesterday, (for about the hundredth time just this year) that Christmas is all about the children. The intended message of that statement was hardly on the mark, for they were thinking about keeping Christmas fun. Christmas is for the **children of God**, both young and old, that all the children of God may more fully appreciate that wonder of the grace of God in the birth of our Savior. The message of John the Baptist which we have examined this morning is very helpful as the Spirit of God works in our hearts through that message, and brings us to confess our sins and believe on Jesus in life and in death. This morning we are blessed to receive the Lord's Supper and the assurance of forgiveness offered to us by our Lord in the sacrament also.

May we be blessed to know Jesus as Lord and Savior and worship Him in spirit and in truth.

**AMEN.**

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.