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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
December 5, 2021
2nd Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons: Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11

Hymns: 356:1-3,5,7; 63; 75; 50:2,3

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

Sermon Text: Luke 3:1-6

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

Make His paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough ways smooth;

⁶ And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ” (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

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

In Christ Jesus, God Incarnate, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Advent season should bring images of John the Baptist. One can hardly go through an Advent season without considering the man, the prophet called John the Baptist. John was a central character in God's plan for the coming of His kingdom on earth. John's birth was a miraculous birth, being born to elderly parents, being raised as a nazarene. The coming of John was foretold by Isaiah and again by Malachi. John was to prepare the way for the Lord's coming. This was of course a spiritual preparation that John was entrusted with, that he would proclaim a special message to the people of Israel that they might be ready for the Lord's appearing as the Messiah.

We read of John's preaching in the wilderness, and his strange manner of dress as well as his strange and austere diet. But we also understand that he didn't mix words. He was very direct in his message. It was a message of repentance.

Now, we live so long after John's preaching, and we hardly need to hear what John had to say, do we, at least not before Christmas? After all, don't we want to stay focused on the stable and the Lord Jesus' humble birth? For that to have its God-given impact on our hearts and lives it is important for us not only to remember John the Baptist, but to recall his message for ourselves.

So today the Holy Spirit would direct us with His Word to --

THEME: Hearing John's Call to Repentance.

I. John Preached a Baptism of Repentance.

Our text uses that expression that John "*went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*" (v.3) That is the message we need to key in on as we consider the message of John the Baptist and the impact it should have on our hearts and lives. Let us consider this advent message. It is an advent message because it is about being prepared for the Lord's coming. It is about having one's heart prepared for the Lord's coming. In any of the three ways we think of Jesus' coming, we need to be spiritually ready. Yes, in December we think about Jesus coming into the flesh with His birth in Bethlehem, but that means very little unless we are also

prepared for the Lord's coming into our hearts. And without the Lord's coming into our hearts, we would hardly look forward with eager anticipation for the Lord's coming on the Last Day.

So, let's talk about that message of John, the preaching of a baptism of repentance. We know the word baptism. We know it as a special rite in which water is applied in connection with the Word of God. We know it's important. We might wonder if John's baptism differed greatly from what we do at Christ's command today. The essential truth focuses in on the word "**repentance.**" We still look for repentance in connection with baptism, and we expect and **receive the remission of sins.**

Let's key in on that word "*repentance.*" We know that John didn't mince words. We might say he was willing to call things as he saw them. When John saw sin, he preached the law of God without apology. People came to John, and they heard a true and clear message about their sin. John did call for a turning away from sin. He didn't do that apart from the gospel. John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

The real meaning of repentance is not limited to sorrow over sin. Many people sorrow over their sin, even despair over their sin, and yet live in sin, even embrace their sin! Mankind's thinking about sin is all wrong. People's thoughts go all over the place when they think about their sin and their vain attempts to find an answer for their sin. They rationalize it as not being so bad. That is so common it almost characterizes our society. No sin is so bad! Or they consider it possible to make up for their "mistakes" (people try to avoid the word sin for their own behavior) by doing good to others and trying hard to be nice. "Nice" doesn't take sin away. Being respectable in the community or doing generous deeds of charity can't fix what's wrong in one's heart. All of that is wrong thinking about sin.

Repentance means **to change one's mind about sin**, to change one's **thinking** about sin. Repentance is not only recognizing the serious nature of sin and how it has alienated us from God, but also comprehending the true and correct thinking about **the fix for sin.** **John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.** He preached the grace of God in the coming Christ whom he

pointed to and identified as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1:29)

It is God who changes one’s thinking about sin. God works through the message preached, the gospel message of the all-atoning sacrifice for sin in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to believe. The Spirit changes our minds and our hearts so that we think of Jesus as the cure for sin. And so, we also received this baptism for the remission of sins. In baptism our sins are washed away. The filth of sin has been removed. Our sin is in remission. It is gone, gone forever by the grace and love of God in Christ the Babe of Bethlehem who came into the world to redeem us, to buy us back that we might be ransomed from sin, and restored to God’s family.

This faith isn’t a static thing. This faith is a living power, a power supplied by the Holy Spirit. Through our continuing to hear the Word the Spirit changes things in our lives. That is how --

II. John’s Message Cleared the Way for the Lord.

We still hear John’s message today. The messenger might have changed but the Lord supplies faithful messengers of His gospel to bring His divine grace and power into our hearts and lives. We hear the message of the prophets as we open the Word. We hear the message of John the Baptist and hear **the voice of Jesus Himself** as we read the Gospels. We hear the same powerful gospel message from the Apostle Paul and the other apostles as we read the inspired epistles. And the Lord provides pastors and teachers to speak the Word of God, to speak the Word faithfully that it might take hold of our lives and keep the highway to our hearts open and clear for the Lord Jesus to abide in our hearts and be glorified in our lives.

Hearing this message proclaimed by John the Baptist makes a difference in our lives. The Word of God is living and powerful. It clears the obstacles that hinder the Lord from coming to His people, that hinder God’s people from coming to the Lord. Think of how the devil seeks to sidetrack us in life to follow what we *feel* rather than what is true. Consider how our own desires lead us to pursue what we enjoy rather than deepen our relationship with the

Lord. Consider how the world lays so many attractions with its riches and pleasures before us to distract us, keeping our eyes focused on this life in this world rather than keeping our eyes focused on our heavenly goal.

This is where the message of John the Baptist comes into play. This is the same message the Apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to the Colossians: “*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.* ³*For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* ⁴*When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*” (Colossians 3:2-4) Through faith we share in Jesus’ death on the cross., By faith we died **to** sin because of Him who died **for** sin. We have a new life in Christ.

That is the message we need to hear. It was the message John proclaimed -- “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.* ⁵*Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth.*” (Luke 3:4-5) The **power is in the message** of a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. The **power** is of the **Holy Spirit** who has worked faith in our hearts through baptism and the Word of God. This brings the clearing of the obstacles that would get in the way of our relationship with the Lord being really alive, vital and vigorous.

We can identify the obstacles that rise up in each of our own lives. We know the worries and concerns or the lusts of the flesh, or the pleasures and treasures of this world that draw us all in. May we also understand that it is the hearing of the same message proclaimed by John the Baptist, the message of our salvation in Jesus who was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the message of the remission of sins that comes to us through faith, that flattens these earthly concerns and desires and knocks them out of the way. With this wondrous gospel message the Spirit of God paves the way for the Lord Jesus to enter and dwell within our hearts.

You see, as we get closer and closer to our celebration of Jesus’ birth this is what brings us where we ought to be spiritually for the richest and best Christmas observance.

III. John’s Message Opens our Eyes to See our Salvation.

When we look about our homes decked out for Christmas, surely many of us will “Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” is it just “fa-la-la-lah” that fills our consciousness? Or is it that we see the representation of everlasting life in the evergreen boughs and the Christmas tree directing our eyes to heaven from whence our Savior came? Are the gifts reminding us of the greatest of gift that was given when Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Do we see Jesus everywhere? That is what the message of John the Baptist brings before us, and that is the true spirit of Christmas that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

It is in the manger that we, with eyes of faith, see the Babe of Bethlehem as the Prince of Peace. The wonder of the angelic chorus sings to our hearts of that peace and good will that our Savior God revealed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14) It comes to us in the message which God shares with us through His messengers, as the Apostle John also wrote in the opening words of his first epistle:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” (1John 1:1-4)

And so *“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”* (v.6)

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)