

Selected Sermons #3

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

MATTHEW 3:1-12 3rd Sunday in Advent

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,
‘prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’ “

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Dear repentant and forgiven sinners -

It happens now and then, for one reason or another, that we invite a guest pastor to deliver a sermon to our congregation. Therefore it will not seem unusual to you when I say that we have a guest speaker today, for we are to listen to a sermon by John the Baptist. He has not made a new sermon for more than 1900 years, but the old one will be good enough, as we will see.

I cannot promise that you will like this guest preacher; for one thing, he will certainly strike you as a very odd figure. He is neither a popular man nor a good mixer but lives in the desert alone and is roughly clothed in coarse garments of camel hair, knows none of the luxuries of life but eats roasted locusts and such wild honey as he can find. He is a very serious man, one who never knew more than a small handful of personal friends. To be popular was not his calling. He was a gospel herald, or proclaimer, the first of the New Testament. Truly to preach the gospel

does not make a person popular, because the gospel is not a popular message. It finds people in their sins, and it seeks to tear people from their sins. John was the man crying in the wilderness, as Isaiah had foretold him, but it was not only a wilderness of nature in which he stood. The real desert in which he worked was the dry, dead, human heart, where no fruits grew except the fruit of sin, which is death.

Do you think, then, that he will not feel at home in our pulpit or is not needed here? Perhaps we can judge that better a little later; now let John the Baptist preach to us. My duty will be merely to help you understand him fully. Give your heart-felt attention to -

John's sermon on repentance, for

I. It is a most timely sermon

II. It is a most needful sermon.

I. John the Baptist spoke many words. His sermons were perhaps not brief, but whatever he said, this was his message, this was his subject, herein he announces his constant theme, and this is the **purpose of all his preaching – "Repent, for the kingdom is at hand!"** It would be a waste of time to listen to any further words of John if we failed to understand at the very beginning what

he is talking about. What good is a sermon if the hearers are in ignorance of the meaning of the subject?

John cries, “**Repent!**” so his subject is **repentance** – and what is that? If it is something that we should do – how do we do it, when and why? We have to know! Did the people of John’s day understand what he meant? We are told that they came and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. John was satisfied with this; therefore the people must have understood. Let us make sure that we fully understand what our preacher for today is talking about.

Repentance – a familiar word it is, to be sure, but the meaning which people put into it is not always God’s meaning, and not the meaning it has in John’s preaching. Some people will give us a strange picture of repentance. They will say, “A soldier sits in a fox-hole while the bombs and shells roar all about him, and as he sits there, he thinks of his past life – of his sins especially, of his neglect in seeking the Lord; he fears greatly and is very sorry for what he has done.” That, they say, is repentance.

Perhaps sometimes the word has that meaning, but not when John uses it. When John says, “**Repent!**” **he uses it in God’s sense.** When Judas, after betraying his Lord, is frightened and sorry, when he returns the blood-money

he earned with his sin and goes out and hangs himself, the Word of God calls it *contrition* – but that is not repentance.

When the Baptist calls, “**Repent!**” it was very much as though he were crying out to the desert land in which he lived, “*Stop being a desert! Change your whole nature! Become a fruitful, inhabited country!*” Repentance means a complete turning about, a full turn in the opposite direction. Judas the traitor was going headlong to eternal destruction and damnation. He did look back over his shoulder, but he never turned about. His was not repentant.

Let us set it forth in another picture. On a Sunday morning a man gets into his car and starts out for Mankato to go to a pool hall. That is his purpose; that is his way; that is according to his nature. But while on the way, suddenly he stops, turns his car around, returns to Nicollet and to church. Repentance is a change just as complete as that! It is a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life - not in part, but in **the opposite direction**. After repentance a man is just the opposite of what he was before.

To this change John was sent by God to invite all, for the reason that **the Kingdom of heaven was at hand**. A glorious opportunity had opened up for them! Their

chance had come to enjoy a new kind of life – namely, to belong to a Kingdom which is of heaven and heavenly, the kind of Kingdom inhabited by such creatures as angels, the eternally blessed and happy spirits. They were to join the family of the true and holy God, who was to become their Father and their almighty King at the same time, under whose rule they would lack no good and enjoy only the good – righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost.

That this kingdom was at hand did not mean that it was something new. Long it had been in the world; Abraham was a member of it with David, Noah, Elijah, and countless others – but it was at hand to the people to whom John preached. It stood at their door; it was giving them a wonderful welcome just then; it would shine with especial splendor in the coming of the Son of God. “If ever you shall belong to it,” cried John, “**now is the time. Repent!**”

But are people ready for this? Indeed, some would have us believe that people are always ready to belong to the Kingdom of heaven. We are even told that the human race is the Kingdom of heaven and that they are its god. John knew nothing of this. He saw a horrible urgency, a great need; he trembled at what might happen. As little as ice can live in fire, as little as oil can mix with water, even less thinkable is it that flesh and blood will enter the Kingdom of God without help. “**Most assuredly, I say**

to you,” said Jesus, **“unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”** (John 3:3) The Kingdom of Heaven is what its name says; it is not of earth and it is not earthly – while people are earthly and nothing but that. Their nature is corrupt, their ways evil, their hearts untrue, and their spirit dead.

When the Kingdom of Heaven meets people, something must happen. There must be a complete change, so complete that Jesus calls it a **new birth**. When John says, **“Repent!”** he is calling for a miracle – but not for a moment does he think that they can change themselves, for repenting is something which must be done not by people but through the working of God. When the Kingdom of Heaven comes to people, it changes them.

The Baptist simply announced the news and announced it in that critical time, lest people stubbornly resist the change. **“Repent!”** means not “change yourselves,” but rather, “do not resist the grace of God which is even now working to cleanse you, forgive you, wash you clean, and make you new. God is here now; he is turning you from earth to heaven; he is changing your mind. Oh, take the strength he gives and the life he awakens in you!”

Will we allow John to preach that sermon to us? **Is it timely** today as it was then? Let your heart answer that.

If this is a Christian congregation, then with all our hearts we are interested in the Kingdom of Heaven, even as we are sick of the vanities of the kingdoms of this world and abhor the kingdom of darkness out of which we were saved through the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven is our pride, our joy, our only comfort and hope. We can safely say that this Kingdom was never more at hand and never nearer than it is this day to the hearts of people and to our hearts. The invitation to membership was never more real than it is today. We have never been more graciously urged, and the blessings of the Kingdom have never been as plain to hungry souls as **in these days** of dreadful earthly bankruptcy.

Why should it not be the right time to let John preach to us, saying, "**Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!**"? Is the call wasted? You say, "We have repented long ago." Oh, my friends, what you mean is that we have often been invited and we have often been drawn and we have been baptized and have had forgiveness, so that God's earnestness and sincerity must be without doubt. But let it be said – and I would show you –

II. John's call to repentance is not only timely, it is needful. Earlier we set forth what repentance is. If you recall, we said that repentance is a complete change of mind, heart, and life. Now let us put it differently.

Repentance, as shown in our Gospel text, is a change of people in three steps.

First, there is the change of mind when people come to see that what they were and loved was sin, that it was not good, but evil, and that it meant damnation. This is the new mind which repentance brings, the new way of looking at oneself and seeing for the first time the truth. This produces contrition, sorrow over sin – as we see when the people of John’s day came confessing their sins.

Secondly, there is the change of heart. Those who see and confess their sins also learn to believe with all their heart in the forgiveness of sin, in the mercy of God, in his Son Jesus – and turn to him. This is the change of heart that is signified in our text by the baptism of those who confessed their sins.

And finally, there is the third part of repentance, the new life. The changed person walks a new road and does new things. He brings forth *fruits worthy of repentance*, as John says. The God-fearing, earnest striving to live a God-pleasing life, the daily struggle against sin and temptation – that is most certainly a part of real repentance. That may be given as the first reason for finding the preaching of John **needful to us**. We say we have been turned, that we have repented. Well and good – but was Luther wrong

when he declared, “The Christian’s entire life must be a repentance”? For what is it if we fail and show no fruits?

And we do fail greatly! Is evil speech, stinginess, once a year at the communion table, lying, cursing, drunkenness, slander and gossip - a fruit of repentance? Are there none of these among us? Oh, the truth is that we must be turned each day back from sin to righteousness, from falling to standing by the merciful lifting arms of the Lord. We have need of starting all over each day with fruits worthy of the repentance we claim to have. And if we do not, then our whole life is a lie, and we are yet in our sins.

There may very well be those among us whose repentance is a lie; that is the second reason for saying that John’s preaching is **needful**. Turn your attention to the experience he had in his day, when among the people who came for baptism and confession there appeared a group of men who had no intention whatever of changing their ways – because they had refused right at the start to see their sinful condition and repent of it and also had refused to believe in the forgiveness of their sins. John calls them *generation of vipers*, a family of snakes. When God stepped on the hard shell of their human nature, as one steps on serpent’s eggs, out crawled a snake, not a child of God. These Pharisees and Sadducees were fakers,

hypocrites. Are there not also some of those among the professed Christians of today?

It is easy to say, "I have repented." It is easy to be baptized with water, but is there one who has never been baptized with anything but water because he has stubbornly refused to be baptized also with the Holy Ghost and in his cleansing fire – who will have none of the new life but wants to continue in his sinful way and deceive us? Let him know that John is preaching to him – because there is yet time, and because it is needful that people come to their senses. For John baptized with water only and even today that is all that we can do. We have no way of sorting out the hypocrites, yet there is One who can and will, whose *winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his threshing floor, and gather his wheat into the barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

Can we do less than say it, and say it again, while the Kingdom is at hand, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked" (Galatians 6:7) Will we not let John point at the axe whose sharp cutting edge is already lying at the root of every human tree where the fruits of repentance are lacking? Disguise yourself as wheat . . . the great Savior will in his coming winnow you out like chaff and burn you. Hide

**yourself like a tree behind green leaves of fine talk . . . the
axe will find you. Look to your fruits, you Christians!**

**That is the sermon you have heard from John the
Baptist today, and the sermon you will take with you as you
live a life that by God's grace will be a life of repentance
and bearing fruit that will endure unto life everlasting. In
Jesus' name. Amen!**

Comfort, comfort ye my people #61

When all the world was cursed #272

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry #63