

Ben Libby

Sermon

December 13th, the 3rd Sunday in Advent

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. AMEN. Our sermon text this morning is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, the first 12 verses.

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 2 “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” 3 Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” 4 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. 6 They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! 9 Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. 10 Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed...

Continuing in Pastor Libby’s examples of Christmas songs which are less than ideal, there is another song which we hear all the time at Christmas that in a weird way reminds me of our text. It is so well known, I bet you could probably sing it right now, word for word, without even thinking about it. But, if you really do think about it word for word, it’s a little disturbing.

Really concentrate on the lyrics of the Christmas classic, “Santa Claus is coming to town”... *You better watch out | You better not cry | You better not pout | I’m telling you why | Santa Claus is coming to town*

Whereas most secular Christmas songs look forward to the happy event of Christmas, this song, despite it’s chery tune, really warns about it. It is telling people to watch out! Why? Because Santa is coming to town! Why would we need to watch out for Santa

coming to town? Well, according to the song, you need to be good for goodness sake before he comes, or else we might end up on the naughty list.

This song really emphasizes a moralism and a work righteous attitude that goes hand in hand with the worldly Christmas message. You need to be good so that good happens to you on Christmas. But what is the standard for what is and is not good? What exactly is the difference between “naughty” and “nice”? The song is not that detailed. The best guideline for being nice is to not cry and not pout. Still, for those really wondering how to get on the right side of the man coming to town, what must we do to get off the naughty list?

Well, thankfully we don’t need to wonder endlessly about what really separates the naughty from nice.

Also, we do not watch out for some fictional figure who doles out gifts depending on how nice we were. The stakes are much higher than all that. In this season of Advent, we watch out for the coming of Jesus Christ the righteous. He too is making a list. It's called the book of life. Either you are on it or you're not. What determines whether we end up in it? It is not deeds, rather it is faith. Yes, dear Christians, we better watch out, for He is coming quickly. We better cry, and bear fruits worthy of repentance. And I'm telling you why, it is because He is going to baptise with fire! Jesus Christ is coming to town!!! We pray - MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT O LORD, OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER, AMEN!!!-

A few Sundays ago, we talked about all that went into the birth of John the Baptist. The prophecies that came before his birth, the birth itself, and the prophecies that would follow it as well. This was a miraculous birth that pointed ahead to another miraculous birth. John's birth, just like his life, pointed to Jesus. Here, we have John in his ministry, doing what was prophesied of him hundreds of years prior...

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 2 "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!" 3 Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." 4 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

In these opening verses, there is some information we get and some that we do not. The timeline isn't exactly clear. "In those days", doesn't really nail down when John started preaching. But his message is not only clear, it is stark, and it is fulfilling. His message is one of **"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!"** Matthew then says this message is what Isaiah foretold when wrote the words of Isaiah 40.

But then we are given an incredible amount of detail about John's diet and clothing. Why is it relevant that we know that his clothing was made of camel's hair, that he wore a leather belt, and that he ate locusts and honey?

We are given this amount of detail for a few reasons. John was the new Elijah. This was prophesied in Malachi 4, which we had a few Sundays ago, and Jesus also said as much in Matthew 11. Elijah was thought to have been dressed similarly. But John's outfits and diets were also symbolic of what was really important in a prophet of the LORD. It wasn't dressing up in nice clothing, or being seen in prominent places. Those were the things that the pharisees were concerned about. John dressed in the most basic clothes and dwelt in the wilderness. His ministry was one of bringing things back to the basics.

There was a reason John was in the wilderness and not the cities. It wasn't just to live a simple life. Rather, it got the people out of the cities and back into the wilderness. It was kind of the symbolic reversal of the Children of Israel's conquest of the promised land. They came from the cities and journeyed back out to the desert. They would go back to their figurative beginnings to hear his message of repentance, which they had somehow lost.

John was way different than any other religious leader of the day. They all thought they could keep the law if they lived in the right way. John's message was of "You have NOT lived the right way. So therefore, repent! Prepare for the Messiah by repentance! He is coming and is even now at hand!"

What is your relationship to your alarm clock like? I don't know about you, but my relationship to my alarm clock is an hostile one. I resent it. When it functions, it is jarring, and I usually do what I have to do to make it stop as soon as possible. Alarm clocks, annoying as they may be, are undeniably important. They can be the difference between people being early, on time, or late. Important as they are, they are neglected, snoozed, ignored, even thrown against walls in disgust. Still they serve a most important function.

John the Baptist was the world's alarm clock! He rang out the true message of the Law with the

implication that the people needed to wake up! The only to truly prepare for Jesus was to point out sin. That was the tough and challenging job that John had to do. It's not that surprising that he was ultimately martyred for it.

We, too, need to ring out the same message. This does not mean that we need to wear the same clothing as John, or switch it up and eat straight honey and locust. We need to tell people about Jesus. But if they don't know that they are sinful and need a Savior from sin, then why would they value the message of that Savior? Essentially, all men know that they are sinful and are doomed because of it. But, they would rather sleep through that guilt and shame than wake up to repentance. This fact of the natural law being in all men is what Paul was talking about in our Epistle this morning: **for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, 15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them**

Of course, before we can throw the law around, we have to first realize that we are just as guilty of it. We know by scripture that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We know that **"by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Rom 3:20 NKJ)"** And that includes us. Before we can tell others of their sin, we need to realize that we are just as sinful. We then have spirit led repentance and only then should we sound the alarm. "You better watch out!" is not just a message to eager children at Christmas. It is a message that all people need to hear, for most definitely, Jesus Christ is coming to town!

As John was preaching his message of repentance to the crowds, he saw a particular group that not only needed to hear this message, but apply it to their lives.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to

flee from the coming wrath? 8 Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! 9 Do not think of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. 10 Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

This is quite the rebuke from John. Isn't he assuming a bit here? Well, maybe, but that doesn't mean that he was wrong or off base at all. He probably could guess what they were thinking. After all, the pious Pharisees and Sadducees would never listen to what he would be saying. They wouldn't even be able to get over the camel hair in his coat, let alone let his strong words sink in.

Both parties' (Pharisees and Sadducees) teachings were well known. Even though they disagreed doctrinally, both parties prided themselves on their heritage. His point here to them, "that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from stones", is one that they would find offensive. But the point is factual. God would do so, we have been sons of Abraham, heirs of the covenant God made with him. As the prophet Ezekiel said, **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Eze 36:26 NKJ)"**

The fact of the matter was that those Pharisees and Sadducees were not there for the right reasons. Maybe they came out to John to see what all the fuss was about. Maybe they came out to be seen by the other people. But they were not there to hear his words, nor to do what he told them here. To **"produce fruit in keeping with repentance."**

What does that all entail though? What are fruits in keeping with repentance? Well, if you are going to bear fruits of repentance, you first need to start with repentance. You need to hear the Law, that I am sinful, that I not only don't deserve anything, I infact deserve to go to hell for eternity for all the wrong that I have done. This is not a fact that is only true for some and not for others, it is universally true. And yet, every

person must come to this conclusion, or else the life saving gospel has no value to them.

But then, the Gospel comes in. It points out the same person John would point out later. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, would indeed take away the sin of the world. This fact of faith should make us all jump for joy! That is why we sing "Joy to the World!" at Christmas time. It was the time when God did what He said, and Jesus was born to save us, His people from their sins.

We are saved alone through faith in Jesus Christ. But saving faith in Jesus Christ is never alone. After we know this blessed truth from God Himself, then we have a reaction to it. We can now serve our God, who saved us personally, by personal acts and service. Our salvation doesn't depend on anything we do. But once we have been led to believe that Jesus has saved us, then how can we not respond with words and deeds? As Jesus would say **"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5 NKJ)**

Finally, we get to what John would become known for. They call John the baptist for a reason! **11 I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

When one speaks about John in the Bible, if you are speaking about the forerunner who was the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, he usually gets the title added, "the baptist", or "the baptizer". Why is this? Well, for one thing it separates him from the other well known John the apostle, the Son of Zebedee and the brother of James. But that was also one of the things he did to turn the people back to repentance. Verse 6 says that the people of the region went out to him and **they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.** But then at the end of this section, he draws a line and a comparison with what

his baptism and ministry was and the baptism and ministry of the one who was greater than he.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

There is a bit of confusion with what John is comparing here. After studying this, I think what he is saying is clear. The baptism that John used is the very same baptism that we typically think of. It is the baptism that we have all been baptised with and made a part of God's family and kingdom. The only difference between the two is he baptized pointing ahead to Christ, whereas we were baptized into what Christ had already had done.

So then, what is the difference in baptism John used and the baptism of Jesus which John is comparing? John said, **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** It's hard to read that and not think about pentecost, where the gift of the Holy Spirit was given and tongues of fire where on the Apostles. But I think that is a specific event, and that might fall under what John is talking about, but is not limited to it. This is talking about something more universal...

Have you ever heard the term, "that was a real baptism by fire"? The idiom originates from this text, as well as the parallel account in Luke. Basically it means that one is thrown into the deep end. Someone has a great task thrust upon them suddenly, and it is time to sink or swim. Certainly, you could say that Christ's whole ministry was a baptism by fire. Right after this account and Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan, immediately Jesus is in the thick of it, being tempted by Satan for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. But Jesus always overcame through His trust in the Father and His promises.

I think the real meaning of what Christ would baptize with is addressed in the following verses: **12 His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

The baptism that was greater than what John did, what has been done to us, is the power of Jesus Christ the righteous. It is one that determines what happens into eternity. We are washed with the Holy Spirit and Fire. Either we possess the Holy Spirit and

the life saving message inside of us, or we don't. The fire that follows is either a purifying fire, that removes the sin stains that we made or it becomes an all consuming fire that will burn forever. Peter wrote about it in his first letter: **1Pe 1:7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,**

When Jesus comes to town, so to speak, it is going to be by fire. That is how this world will finally end. For the believer, this a purifying and cleansing fire. For the person who believes in anything else, it is a destructive force from which there is no escape. That is why John's words are so harsh! The people needed to wake up! He was coming! This advent means salvation. But it also means destruction! That is the picture of the winnowing fork. The wheat will be gathered, the chaff will be burned! When Santa Claus comes to town, if you're naughty you might get a lump of coal in your stocking. When Jesus comes to town, if you're unrepentant in your sins, it means eternal hell fire!

These are mighty strong words from the forerunner. There is a whole lot of law. But where is the Gospel? You might read the text and think it is nowhere to be seen. But it is there. It is there in the people's response. They did confess their sins, they turned to repentance, and they were baptised. Also, the living Gospel, Jesus Christ, shows up immediately following these verses! **Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. (Matthew 3:13)**

That was the whole point of John's ministry. It wasn't just law. It was both law and gospel. It did say, "hey, you all need to repent!" Which of course is still true. We too need to repent every single day because our sin creeps into every day of our lives. But repentance is not just something we do. It is something that is granted to us! We recognize our sin, but the actual turning is something that God has to do for us. You confess your sins, and then God, by His grace, turns you around to see the beautiful Savior, who has kept

the law for you and dies for you. It is all the same message!

You better watch out? Indeed! Christ, is coming back to this earth from which He ascended. When He does come back, it will be in fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand! **he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** This is frightening to the sinner inside of us all. But it is extremely comforting to the repentant new man! What is said here to those who trust in Him as their Savior? **He will gather his wheat into the barn.** That is it! That is the assurance that we will be with Him in paradise!

Jesus does not have to make a list and check it twice. He already knows who believes in Him. Dear Chrstians, your names are written in His book of life! You will be gathered to Him, and there is nothing that anyone can do to separate you from Him! We will indeed watch out, not out of fear but rather out of anticipation. We will cry, not out of terror or pain but rather out of praise. Jesus Christ is coming to town, and He will take us with Him to heaven forever! AMEN!!!