

“Repent! The Beginning is Near!”

Sermon: Year C, Advent 2

Texts: Luke 3:1–6, Luke 1:68–79

Preached: December 9, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the One who breaks into our darkness with light. AMEN

“Repent! The end is near!” How many of you just got the cartoon image of the street corner preacher holding up a sign, or with the sandwich board, warning people that they had better “get right with God before it’s too late”? I saw a photograph online of one of those folks. His sign said, “REPENT Fornicators, Homosexuals, Liars, Thieves, Obama Voters, Buddhists, Dirty Dancers, Hindus, Gangster Rappers, Muslims, Drunkards, Feminists, Immodest Women, Democrats, Liberals, Evolutionists, Atheists, Potheads, Sodomites THE END IS NEAR! HELL AWAITS YOU!” (I lost count, but I think I was mentioned in there at least a few times!) Honestly, the end could arrive before you even got done reading his sign! But think about the message there... basically, it’s “Hey! Stop being bad! Or at least what I consider to be bad! And do it fast, because otherwise you’re going to run out of time, and God is going to hate you forever and make you suffer!” I have heard some of those preachers describe it as “frightening the Hell out of you, or frightening you out of Hell.” Has that technique ever truly worked, by the way? Just wondering...

I think for many of us, as soon as we hear the name “John the Baptist,” that’s the image we get, isn’t it? Kinda crazy-looking guy, wild beard, wild eyes, dressed funny, standing out someplace in the middle of nowhere screaming at people that they had better repent, shape up, and stop sinning, because God is really, really hacked at them. All John the Baptist lacks is the sign, in our view of him, right? It sounds to us like he’s trying to frighten people into straightening up and flying right. Confess your sins, and get baptized, and God won’t make you burn. And then get on the straight and narrow highway and start making your way toward heaven under your own steam. But I wonder, do you really think huge crowds of people would have been flocking out into the wilderness area on the other side of the Jordan River to hear that kind of message and to have this angry, weird guy dunk them under the muddy waters of the Jordan?

Next week’s gospel lesson picks up where this one left off, and I’ll admit that it’s easy to listen to it and think that this is John’s message. There’s a lot in there about wheat being winnowed out and chaff being burned with unquenchable fire. So it’s easy to think that’s talking about a fiery hell... but then the very next verse says, “And so with many exhortations John preached good news to the people.” I’m sorry, “turn or burn” doesn’t sound like very good news, does it? So what is the good news that he’s proclaiming?

Part of our problem in understanding what John the Baptist is all about is that we misunderstand the word “repentance.” What do we think it means? We think that “to repent” means to confess all our sins and to feel really, really sorry for having been bad. And we think that if we feel really, really sorry enough, that we can make God stop being mad at us, and God will then have to forgive us, and won’t send us to Hell. But that’s not what the word “repent” means. The word in Greek is *metanoia*, which literally means “a changed mind or perception,” or “going beyond where your mind is right now.” It’s about suddenly seeing things in a fresh way, seeing ourselves and the world from a different perspective, having changed minds and hearts, turning around and looking a different direction, having new minds and hearts put in us. It’s about a fresh awareness of God and of God’s purposes, it’s an openness to God’s Spirit. And when it comes to sin, and the wrong that we have done, it’s about realizing that there is a different way, God’s way, and it’s about realizing that we have forgiveness. We don’t buy our forgiveness by saying how sorry we are... we say how sorry we are because God catches our attention, gives us God’s own mind and heart and a glimpse of God’s perspective, and enables us to turn, to start afresh, to become part of the new thing that God is doing.

Why do we always want to make this about us and about our own power? We keep trying to say that if we can just feel bad enough, and then be good enough, that we can earn our way into God’s good graces and be forgiven. But that’s not how it works. God’s good grace is always there, it’s just that we forget that. God’s forgiveness is already granted... but we turn away, we take our eyes off God and our attention drifts... in spite of our best intentions, we do wrong, we fail others and harm others, we don’t always act lovingly. Our minds get clouded, turned in on themselves, darkened by our worries and by our selfishness

and self-centeredness. That's the way our minds are. But that's when God comes and wants to be our focus again. That's when God comes with this gift of *metanoia*, this gift of repentance, of turning.

So John the Baptist's message isn't about telling us how horrible we are and how we can save ourselves if we just manage to be good enough people. His message isn't about making our way to God under our own steam. It's about something very, very different. When he quotes the prophet Isaiah, talking about a highway through the desert, he's not talking about a highway that we travel to get to God. Listen again: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Think about this: Maybe that highway is not for us to travel to God...it's for God to travel to us! That's the Good News John is proclaiming: This isn't about us figuring out how to live good enough lives that we can get up to God's level where God is sitting and waiting for us...the Good News is that God has decided not to wait...God has decided to come running down the road toward us to meet us where we are. And if we keep getting turned back toward the highway, allowing our eyes to be oriented God's direction, we're going to see how God draws near to us. God is going to come find us, no matter where we are on the road. God wants to give us new minds and hearts, God wants us to know that we are forgiven, God wants us to know that we can, by God's power, live in changed and transformed ways.

The song that we sang instead of a psalm today, "Blest Be the God of Israel," is actually linked to John the Baptist. It's the song that Luke tells us John's father Zechariah sang to John when he was born. Listen to the last portion of the song as scripture records it: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to God's people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." John's purpose is to give us the knowledge that God saves and redeems us, no matter where in the wilderness we may find ourselves. John's message to us is that God has tender mercy and love toward us, and that a new day, a new dawn, will break in on us in our dark places, in the places of death in our lives. It is the light of Christ that will shine into our darkness and destroy the darkness...it's not about the darkness trying to become light. It's about transformation, about renewal. It's about a new day, a new start. And you and I are gifted and called to be "highway preparers" ourselves as we are guided into the way of peace.

You know, I saw another photo this week that sums it up. This one was also of a man holding a sign announcing what is to come. But instead of saying, "Repent, the end is near!" it said something that is much, much better news, and it's the news John the Baptist proclaims as he sees what God is doing in Christ Jesus, and it's the message of Advent and Christmas...and here's what it said: "The beginning is near!"

Thanks be to God. AMEN