

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[John the Baptist] said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

My sermon this morning continues last Sunday's sermon — a sermon called "In Praise of Repentance." My theme back then was that it is no mere happenstance that Advent precedes Christmas, that John the Baptist precedes our Saviour Jesus, nor that confession precedes absolution. Rather, this is the logic of love. That is, the good news of Christmas is such extraordinary good news that it claims us not only in the hereafter, but also here. The love of God revealed in the incarnation of his only begotten Son is a love so profound that it is unwilling to abandon us to the misery of sin, not even for a moment, and is continually calling us to repentance. It is our daily work. When we wake up in the morning, wipe the sleep from our eyes, among our chief tasks for the day before us is to repent. As Luther puts it in Thesis One of his *Ninety Five Theses*:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

So, that was last Sunday's theme: Repentance is to be our daily work.

My theme in this morning's sermon is that this is not too much more us. The life of repentance is not mysterious, nor obscure, nor reserved for the saints, but rather is within reach of each of us — both intellectually and emotionally. To use the words of Moses of old,

¹¹For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. ¹²It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? ¹⁴But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deut 30:11-14, KJV)

Much of repentance is not mysterious, but more along the practical lines of integrity in your job, robbing no one, and forsaking intimidation. To see this, let's consider this morning's Gospel hero, John the Baptist.

St. Luke's version of this morning story is especially rough and tough in describing the preaching of John the Baptist. John is rough too in St. Matthew's telling of the story, but there his fury is directed toward a rather small target -- the Pharisees and Sadducees. But in this morning's reading from the Third Chapter of Luke, John levels the entire congregation, directing his opening blast, not simply to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but to the "multitudes." "You brood of vipers!"

Strange preaching, and yet divine. The people get up on Sunday morning, weary from a week of work and perhaps a late Saturday night, they bring themselves to church, the preacher steps into the pulpit and blasts them: You brood of vipers!

Yet this is the preacher about whom the Holy Spirit had sung in Zacharias's *Benedictus*:

And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
(Luke 1:67, 76-79, LBW version of the *Benedictus*)

And this is the preacher to whom the multitudes flocked. His preaching seems not to have been off-putting to them. He was a plain man

of rough clothing and rough speech, yet he was a veritable instrument of the Holy Ghost. And so it might always be, that even those who preach to others in a rough way, are nonetheless doing work useful to the Lord.

Your grandfather might be rough in speaking to you. Your pastor might say, Stop that! Cut that out! When you were hoping to hear some gentler counsel. And you yourself, in the heat of the moment, might preach the word of God to others in a rough way, and yet it might be the very word of God in any case.

Two groups in particular are highlighted in this account of the preaching of John the Baptist: the tax collectors and the soldiers. Both groups are Jews, both can boast of being the children of Abraham, and both groups are despised by their fellow Jews as being greedy collaborators with the enemy, with the Roman Empire.

The first thing I want to lift up about these two groups is that the pastoral counsel John gives them is entirely sensible and within their reach. Repentance is not rocket science.

So, the tax collectors come to John asking what they should do:

¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

And John gives them this sensible counsel:

"Collect no more than is appointed you."

Likewise, soldiers ask about the path of repentance:

And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. (Luke 3:14, KJV)

And for the multitudes in general, the concrete path of repentance is not all that hard to figure out:

And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." (Luke 3:10-11)

These are the things the Bible has long taught. Be honest, be charitable, love the Lord your God, love your neighbor.

So that is one theme: The path of repentance is not so hard to discover. We have the Bible, we have the traditions of the church, we have examples of holy lives, including some good people in our own lives. What we often need is not so much more knowledge, but simply that we should turn to the tasks of repentance we already understand.

Another theme is this: The path of repentance is appropriate for both the high and the low. It is the right path for both the most seasoned, saintly, self-confident pillar of the church and for the most awful sinner. The love of God desires the best for each of us, and therefore continually calls us to the path of repentance.

And notice this too: Turning to repentance need not be a traumatic or gut-wrenching experience. John the Baptist does not say to the tax collectors, "Weep bitterly for your sins and then mend your ways. No, he simply says, mend your ways. Collect only what is due you. Likewise with the soldiers. John does not say, Ye soldiers, surrender your lives to Jesus. Lay down your immense rebellion. Claim him as your only Captain." All that is true, but that is not where John begins, for one needs to begin somewhere. When John begins his preaching to the soldiers, he asks them to do something they can calmly and quietly do: Rob no one and be content with your wages.

So, the path of repentance is often plain before us, and appropriate for both seasoned saints of the church and for desperate sinners.

Now, I want to close by lifting up one more theme about the path of repentance: Though the path is often clear and right for each of us, the failure to walk that path is dangerous. It is dangerous for you and dangerous for others.

To develop this idea, let me refer to a subtle Biblical difference between the two groups in this story: the tax collectors and the soldiers. St. Luke says that the tax collectors came to be baptized by John, and they asked him what they should do. But St. Luke declines to say of the soldiers that they came to be baptized. The tax collectors came with a readiness to repent and to yield to a baptism of repentance. But we do not hear the same thing concerning the soldiers.

In this past week's Catechism class with Exie Robertson, we lingered with St. Luke's introduction to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The introduction refers to a trait in our Lord Jesus which some of Israel's religious leaders found strange, even disquieting, and that is that Jesus was a friend of sinners. St. Luke puts it this way:

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the

Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (RSV Luke 15:1-2)

The Church takes great comfort in this, that Jesus is willing to be a friend to sinners, to associate with them and to try to save them and bring them to repentance. The Pharisees and the scribes seem offended by it, but the church values this kind of divine heart.

But the soldiers are a different matter. They too were despised by upright Jews because they, like the tax collectors, had made themselves servants of the Roman Empire. They were Jews. They were among those who might have been tempted to say, "But we are the children of Abraham," but, unlike the tax collectors, they seem not to be seeking repentance.

And this is no game. The next we hear of these Jewish soldiers they are coming to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. we meet them again at the end of the story. These soldiers are the kind of soldiers who came to Gethsemane and arrested Jesus. And the next we hear of these Jewish soldiers in the Gospel of St. Luke, they are mocking Jesus:

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:11, RSV)

The beginning of the story of Jesus is the story of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Refusing the call, marching away, is a dangerous business, for you might well end up hurting some people in this world, and in hurting them, you hurt Jesus himself, who does not deserve that, but rather deserves the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.