In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday, I lifted up a sweet word: redemption. It came from our Lord’s description of the last days. That description was full of frightening images. Jesus spoke of signs in sun and moon and stars, and people fainting with fear and foreboding at what was happening on earth. But then he capped off his discussion of the last days with encouraging words, including that sweet word “redemption.” Last Sunday, Jesus said this:

28Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28, RSV)

A few minutes from now, at the end of this sermon, we are going to be very glad for that word “redemption.” We are going to be baptizing little Sophia Josephine Kitchens. The great thing about that baptism is that our living Jesus Christ promises redemption to Sophia. We want her to go through all of her life knowing that the redemption won by Jesus Christ on Calvary’s cross is meant for her too — not just Peter, James, and John and the famous saints of the church, but also for her. So, “redemption” is a sweet word.

This time, in this sermon, I want to lift up another sweet word, only this one might be a bit surprising to us at first. I mean the word “repentance.” This is a sermon in praise of repentance. John the Baptist (whose banner you see here near the pulpit) was a preacher of repentance. And so, my beginning text for this sermon comes from our Gospel Lesson, from St. Luke 3. It goes this way:

2in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; 3and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3, RSV)

Again, let me speak of Sophia’s baptism. Her baptism has something to do with repentance. Indeed, her baptism launches her into the penitential life. We want her parents to teach her that and continue to join her in that. To be a Christian means that all of our life long, we should be turning away from sin, back toward Jesus. If we should fail from time to time, well, baptism means
that we should pick ourselves up again, turn away from the sin, and move back closer to Jesus.

I bet that I will have harder task before me this morning than last Sunday. It is easy to believe that “redemption” is a good and pleasant thing. It is more challenging to consider “repentance” that way too. But let’s give it a try.

Next Sunday - the Third Sunday of Advent - I am not preaching — for the happy reason that the children of our congregation will be leading us in our liturgy of Lessons and Carols. So, I am not preaching next Sunday, but let me peek ahead to the Gospel Lesson for that day. It is another reading about John the Baptist, again from Luke Chapter 3. Each time I read aloud next Sunday’s Gospel Lesson, I am struck by the final verse. It is a happy verse. It goes this way:

18So, with many other exhortations, he [John] preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:18, RSV)

And God bless our brother John the Baptist for that — that he preached “good news” to the people.

But when you take a look at what John the Baptist was actually preaching, it was pretty rough and tumble preaching. John was taking no prisoners. He starts off by calling his people a “brood of vipers”! Multitudes come to hear John preach, and for their trouble, this is what he says to them:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ’We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (John 3:7-9, RSV)

John continues to preach about fire. He even speaks of our Savior Jesus using that word “fire”-- indeed “unquenchable fire”! John the Baptist is not a prideful man. He does not mean to brag and preach about himself. His whole ministry is to point ahead to Jesus. But when he does that, when he preaches Jesus, he speaks of fire. His words go this way:

16John answered them all, “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:16-17, RSV)
Then, after such fierce preaching, we have the concluding verse of our appointed reading — that happy verse about “good news.” And so I finish up reading aloud the Gospel reading with these wonderful words:

18 So, with many other exhortations, he [John] preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:18, RSV)

I believe we can conclude, then, that “exhortations” are compatible with the Gospel. John the Baptist exhorted the people, and St. Luke the Evangelist calls it preaching “good news.” What kind of exhortations did John preach? Answer: John the Baptist exhorted the people to repent. He exhorted them to turn around and point themselves in a new direction. He exhorted them to leave behind their sinful and unworthy ways and instead to, as he put it, “Bear fruits that befit repentance” (Luke 3:8). John the Baptist was a preacher of repentance, and the people did not mind. His fiery preaching included exhortations to repentance, and the evangelist calls it “good news.” This is what I want to explore in this sermon. I suspect that in the end you and I think repentance is a good thing too. We like last Sunday’s word “redemption,” and well we should, but let us also have friendly feelings toward this Sunday’s and next Sunday’s word “repentance.” For many of us the way forward into a better and happier life includes repentance, the mending of our ways, and a closer walk with Jesus. Let us, then, ponder the idea of repentance. Let us ponder laying down our sins.

I begin with this idea: repentance is not only good in the hereafter but also in the here and now. When our years are done and we head off to heaven and to the judgment seat of Jesus, it will be good for us if we have been living the penitential life here below. Standing before Jesus is likely to go better if we have been working at repentance during these years granted to us. So repentance is good for the hereafter. Now let’s talk about here and now. Repenting is a good thing in our present life. Laying down our sins makes for a better and happier life in the time left to us.

During last Monday Evening’s Bible study class I mentioned to our class that Martin Luther has a noteworthy way of talking about Jesus. Luther was happy to say that Jesus is our Lord. Luther certainly agrees that Jesus is our Savior and our Redeemer, but in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, the first thing that seems to strike Luther’s mind about the gospel is that Jesus is our Lord. His splendid words go this way:

If anyone asks, “What do you believe in the second article about Jesus Christ?” answer as briefly as possible, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.” What is it “to become a lord”? It means that he has redeemed and released me from sin,
from the devil, from death, and from all misfortune. Before this I had no lord or king, but was captive under the power of the devil. I was condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness. (Large Catechism, On the Creed, Kolb/Wengert)

Notice that last phrase there, “entangled in sin and blindness.” Before Jesus comes along and says to us “come, follow me,” we are seriously at loose ends. Until we give our heart to Jesus, our hearts are entangled. They are buffeted by every wind of doctrine. Our hearts are swept along by advertising and publicity and sometimes shallow notions of what is good and true and lovely in a human life. Middle school children heading off to high school, or high school students heading off to college sometimes get swept away by unworthy images of what constitutes a good life. And sometimes they never get over it. Years later they are still drinking and carousing, still casual about sex and marriage, still seeking the shortcuts in life and business. Their hair is getting gray, and there they are, still seeking chiefly to have a good time, but not really having a good time. They are too “entangled in sin and blindness,” to use the fine words of Martin Luther. Their souls are becoming shipwrecked, not only in the hereafter, but also now, to the disadvantage both of themselves and others around.

And so when John the Baptist comes along and says to us, “repent!” It is one of the greatest acts of kindness we might ever receive. If we do yield to that call, if we enter upon the penitential life, if we walk more earnestly with Jesus, others will notice that we are better people, and so will we ourselves. Life will seem better and happier to us.

I will tell you a little detail about being a pastor: one of the great joys of my ministry is simply to work our way through the liturgy of private confession. Here sits or kneels a penitent before me. The penitent has opened his heart, opened her heart, before me and has confessed the sin that might have weighed heavy on the person for many a year. The Private Confession liturgy disciplines me to remind the penitent that he or she is not the first person on God’s green earth to have fallen into sin. The liturgy does this by having the penitent and me read aloud together from Psalm 51. That is King David’s song of yearning that he might have a clean heart again.

1Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2Wash me throughly [thoroughly] from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:1-2, KJV)
“Cleanse me from my sin.” How often in life have we longed for the same thing? How often have we regretted what we have done, regretted the harm we have committed, and longed to get back on track? How often have we followed the path of Peter, who denied Jesus three times and then went out and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:75)? How good it would be to turn or return to friendship with Jesus?

And then, as we approach the end of the liturgy, we shift to Psalm 103, with its joy in forgiveness. I always find myself drawn to one line in particular:

As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12, KJV)

That is infinity! For ancient people, “as far as the east is from the west,” well, that is very far. Endless distance! So far is God willing to remove our sins from us if we be willing to repent.

So repent! That is what John the Baptist says to us. And more importantly, that is what Jesus says to us (Mark 1:14-15, for example). Jesus joins John in that sweet word “repent.” The love of Jesus toward us is not the kind of reckless or careless love that is content to let us trudge on in sin’s misery. Lay it down! Lay sin’s misery down and turn even more toward Jesus. We are soon to celebrate his birth in Bethlehem’s manger. Let us celebrate too his birth and his life in our own hearts and in our own lives, even now. To him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.