

The Necessary Truth

Can you imagine if John the Baptist was preaching today in twenty-first century America? *“You brood of vipers! Repent, for the kingdom of God; the reign of God’s Heavenly rule is at hand!”* Do you think he or his message would be well-received? ***We already know the answer, don’t we?*** We now live in a world where a person’s *feelings* are the most important thing. It doesn’t matter if we’re dealing with precedence and good order or proper procedure. All that is a distant second place to my feelings. Sadly, it doesn’t even matter if we’re dealing with issues of “right and wrong.” Feelings have even come to take **precedence over truth.** Don’t believe me? How many times have you heard someone say that they know something is wrong and that it should be ***addressed and confronted***, but they’re not going to say anything because in confronting the issue, they may hurt the feelings of the other person? *“Bless their heart.”* **That’s not helping anyone!**

Maybe a closer to home, how many times have your feelings been more important than anyone or anything else? We’ll tolerate and even condone or instigate a lot of bad and stupid things if it means our precious feelings will be spared. By the same token, if our feelings get hurt, it’s the absolute worst thing in the entire world. ***There is no one more evil than the person who hurts my feelings! They clearly must be in league with Satan!*** It doesn’t matter if I’m completely in the wrong. It doesn’t matter if I’m acting like a total jerk and caused all the problems in the first place with my sinful behavior. If they hurt my feelings, may God have mercy on their souls, because I sure won’t!

Folks: When you get down to it, it’s not that hard to see that the message of John the Baptist ***IS*** still rejected in our day and age, ***outside as well as inside the confines of the Church.*** You don’t have to imagine “*what if?*” **It’s already fact.** You know as well as I do that there are plenty of “good Christians,” even “good Lutherans” who would, without a doubt, condemn John the Baptist and his “hateful” message of rebuke and repentance. Why? Because it hurts their feelings. It makes them uncomfortable. People love to hear preaching on sin. They just don’t like it when it’s their sin. ***Without a doubt, John the Baptist would be vilified and canceled.*** We know this to be absolutely true because it’s already happening all the time.

That’s the thing with the truth of God’s Word; it doesn’t change—**ever.** God’s message of repentance (and that’s what John was preaching; not his own message, but God’s message of repentance) still sounds out in the wilderness of our American culture, just as it did in the Judean wilderness two thousand years ago. In fact, this message we preach and proclaim today points to the very same thing John the Baptist was in His preaching; namely, ***the Advent of our Lord in all power and might and glory.*** Remember: John was only about six months older

than his cousin Jesus. John was not in the wilderness preaching about Christ's coming to a manger in Bethlehem. No! He was boldly proclaiming the impending coming of the Lord Christ in Judgment; *the same triumphant coming we still await (which can happen at any moment)*. This is why John was so blunt and spoke with such a fiery sense of urgency. This is news of the highest priority! Political-correctness and feelings go out the door at this point. The truth must be told in all its fullness. *Eternal salvation and eternal fiery damnation are at stake here!* This message of repentance is a *brutally honest, yet absolutely necessary message of preparation*, which is what Advent is all about; a penitential season specifically set aside for preparing our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ—past, present, and future.

But what does it mean to repent? I know everyone here understands how repentance comes from hearing the Truth of God's Word and confessing your sins unto God. True repentance doesn't try to make excuses for sin. True repentance doesn't try to blame someone else. *True repentance makes true confession*. We also don't have to do anything on our part **BEFORE** God will hear our repentant confessions and pleas for mercy. We don't have to do "penance," which is nothing more than the wicked and false doctrine known as "works-righteousness." *We don't do penance. Rather, we are repentant, which means that we simply speak God's Truth back to Him*. We confess that we have sinned in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. We confess that we deserve nothing but present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Jesus—not for our own sake; not because of anything we've done—but for the sake of Christ Jesus and His all-redeeming sacrifice, forgive us, dear Lord! Have mercy on us! *That's what true repentance sounds like*.

But... what does true repentance look like? This leads us to a key part of repentance that is so often ignored. We don't like to talk about it. Again, I know everybody here knows that the word "repentance," in the original languages, carries with it the meaning of turning around; making an "about face." Ask yourself: Can you be truly repentant of your sin while still *willingly* engaging in it? *I can't go in two different directions at the same time*. Either I am walking in repentance or I'm not. Either I'm walking in the Light or I'm walking in darkness. Either I'm walking in grace and forgiveness, or I'm walking in sin. *Repentant faith doesn't just talk the talk. It walks the walk*.

When those coming to John, in true repentance to be baptized for the forgiveness of all their sins, ask John, "*We've been baptized. We've been forgiven. What do we do now?*" John tells them very plainly what repentance looks like in their *daily lives and particular vocations*. He doesn't command that they should sell all their goods and run off to the seminary. Nope! "*Whoever has two tunics, share with him who has none. Whoever has food share with him who does not have food.*" *Seems pretty simple, doesn't it?* Don't just talk the talk of being a

concerned Christian who wants to help those in need. Walk the walk! You have two coats. Give one to the poor sap who doesn't have one! How hard is that?

Tax collectors (some of the most hated men in all of Israel, and for good reason; most of them were quite corrupt) ask, "*What about us? What should we do? What do we need to do now?*" Simple. "*You're forgiven. Now act like it. Collect no more than what you are authorized to do.*" Roman soldiers even come to John in repentance. They're baptized and forgiven all their sins. "*What about us? What now?*" Simple. "*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations. Be content with your wages.*" **Notice: John never tells them to stop being soldiers!** He never says, "*Now you need to stop soldiering. Go and pound your swords into pruning hooks and plowshares.*" Nope. "*You've been forgiven all your sins. Now act like it. This is what repentant faith looks like in the day-to-day life of a soldier. Depart in peace, trust in your Lord to provide you with all that you need for this body and life, and serve Him with gladness!*"

Now comes the big question: What does repentance look like in your life? Maybe that's the wrong question. What is repentance *supposed* to look like in your life? If you're honest, the two probably don't match up. Don't just talk the talk. **Walk the walk.** This is just "everyday Christianity," regardless of your particular vocations. If you're not willing to swallow your sinful pride; if you're not willing to let your precious feelings suffer for the sake of walking in true repentance and bearing fruits that are in keeping with repentance; i.e., forgiving others as Christ as forgiven you, loving your neighbor as Christ has loved you, then you need to beware, **because that's not true repentance.** "*Every tree that does not bear good fruit; i.e., the fruits of repentance, is cut down and thrown into the fire.*" That's the Truth! If that hurts your feelings, then you *need* to have your feelings hurt. The Truth is just too important to ignore or gloss over.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: The message of repentance, as difficult and unappealing as it may be, is *necessary* for us to hear, even today (especially today), and it has everything to do with the true Christian understanding of Advent. (There's a reason our forefathers appointed this text for the second Sunday in Advent). Yes: These words sting when they confront us in the midst of our sin. However, as children of God who know and trust in the eternal victory that was won for us in *Christ's first Advent—birth, death, and resurrection—victory that is shared with us this very day in Christ's second Adventing* as He comes to us this very morning in His Word and Sacrament, we no longer fear and tremble at the knowledge that Christ and His Kingdom are at hand. The righteousness of Christ, which is ours in repentant faith, *prepares* us to greet our adventing Almighty Lord in joy. With the eyes of sure and certain saving faith, we look, not with fear, but with true Christian joy, to the third Adventing of Christ, when He comes again in all His glory with a winnowing fork in His hand to separate us from the chaff and take us home—*body and soul complete*—to live

with Him in Heaven for all eternity. Body and soul complete in heavenly paradise for all eternity: I don't know about you, but that sounds like reason to rejoice!

In the meantime, though, until that blessed day when our Lord does call us out of this fallen and sinful world and home to heaven, strive to always be bearing fruits that are in keeping with repentance. Strive to always be walking in true repentance—in the path of righteousness and light. ***Why? Because that's just what repentant faith does. Good fruit trees bear good fruit.*** We don't walk this walk in the hopes that we might be saved, but out of repentant joy that we are saved, in Christ and because of Christ.

May this Good News of your complete forgiveness in Christ be the lamp unto your feet and the light upon your way as you daily walk the walk of repentant faith through this dark and shadowy valley of death. Fear not, for He is the Light shining in the darkness. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and He is with you always, even to the end of the age.

AMEN