

The Third Sunday in Advent
St. Matthew 11:2-15

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There he was in the wilderness, baptizing any and all who came to him with a baptism of repentance. This was his message, still proclaimed to this day by faithful preachers the world over: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2) He was, after all, the voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the LORD, as prophesied by Isaiah. (cf. Isaiah 40:3) This was the preparation that was needed: repentance, a making of room in the heart for the forgiveness that the LORD would bring.

Repentance is described as a turning away; some describe it as "doing a 180," and while that works to describe the turning away from sin, repentance isn't that simple. Repentance is also seeing the sin with which you struggle, the sins that you commit, acknowledging that there is absolutely no hope in yourself to free yourself from this bondage, thereby recognizing your need for a Savior. A response of this repentance? It is as you heard two weeks ago: "Hosanna," that is, "Lord, save now!"

This doesn't come to you of your own will. Inasmuch as you are unable to free yourself from the bondage to sin, you cannot repent of it on your own. That's why it must be preached into you, for in the proclamation of the Word of God, you are brought to faith, a faith that brings to you repentance—to all of that stuff I just mentioned.

Therefore the voice cried out, "Repent." That voice echoes from chancels and pulpits to this day: "Repent" And with that proclamation is given the faith to repent. Furthermore, it was all done in preparation for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was coming, so the people needed to repent. That also happens to be the reason the message continues to this day. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. For one thing, Jesus is present in Word and Sacrament to bring His kingdom to you. For another thing, His return to judge the living and the dead is closer now than it ever has been; the question of when will not be answered apart from, "When the Father wills it."

As for this voice, John the Baptist, and the question of when, Jesus did show up. John had the privilege that all the prophets before Him could only dream of—to point to the One and proclaim of Him that He is the Kingdom of Heaven come down. And point this voice did: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) This privilege is the reason why, according to Dr. Martin Luther, Jesus declared of him that he is greater and worthy of more esteem than any other prophet.

I suppose it could be said that the privilege that John had is extended to preachers today, in a sense. They can point to the font and to the lectern and declare that Jesus is there, with the water and in the Word proclaimed. Even more-so, they can point to the altar and say that Jesus' very body is given to you as bread and His very blood as wine. Still, John had the greater privilege, to point to the Man Himself and say there is the Son of God...the Lamb of God. No one will be able to do that until He comes again, but then, by way of the signs and trumpets and clouds and angels, no would be able to mistake Jesus for an ordinary man—all will know who He is and why He is coming; that being the case, no one will need to point and proclaim as John had.

But this greatest of men born of women met hardship as all who proclaim and believe in Jesus do. For John, it was a prison stint for doing what God had sent Him to do; in point of fact, Herod the tetrarch had him bound and thrown into prison because John had told him that it was not lawful to have his brother's wife. (cf. Matthew 14:3-4) It was from this prison that John sent word to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" You see, John had heard in prison about the things that Jesus had been doing.

I will quickly cover the debate: was John asking for himself or for his disciples? I've spent a great length of time on this in the past. So, let me just say, John was still fully human and the circumstances of life can often cause doubt—being thrown in prison for doing what the forerunner of

the Christ was supposed to do can be one of those doubt-causing circumstances. So, work off the assumption here that John doubted, as did some if not all of his disciples, I suppose. He did ask, "...shall we look for another?" He did not ask, "...shall these look for another?"

So, you can forgive John for asking such a question, given the hardship he was going through. I mean, Jesus did; it was after Jesus heard the question that He said of John that he was the greatest of those born of women. So, if Jesus forgave John, you can, too. After all, as is the case with all preaching, the first audience of every proclamation of the Word of God is the one preaching it. John needed to hear the message to repent as much as all the rest of those who heard him.

That said, this moment of weakness of faith and Jesus' response to it should be of great comfort to you. If John, being in prison, can begin to doubt the authenticity of who Jesus is and be restored by being pointed back to the Scriptures, so can you. Such hardships are not solely reserved for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry, in any of its facets, but for all who bear the name Christ on their foreheads and breasts. Jesus promised that hardships would come. So, you know it's going to happen; nevertheless, this weak and corrupt flesh will not bear such hardships, no matter how insignificant they may seem (to you or to others), and will cast doubt on the authenticity of Jesus' identity. So, in those times, you, too, will ask, "Is Jesus the one?"

Now, John knew of the deeds of Christ. And it was to these, in particular, that Jesus referred, telling John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." He was telling John and his disciples—"Compare what I am doing with what was written about Me by those who came before you. Am I not doing everything prophesied of the Messiah?" It's not unlike Jesus' interaction with Thomas the week after the resurrection. "Do not disbelieve, but believe." I like to believe that John responded in similar fashion to Thomas, and perhaps many, if not all, of his disciples did, too: "My Lord and my God." (John 20:26-28)

The thing is, whether John doubted or his disciples did is immaterial. All of them suffered with the same fallen and corrupt flesh that you do, which seeks to drive you to doubt and despair, which seek to have you breach God's commandments, which seeks to convince that that when God gave the Law, He didn't really mean it. This is the violence that the kingdom of heaven suffers now that the Son of God is in the flesh: there's the question, "Is Jesus really the One?" and the outright denial, "There's no way that Jesus can be the One." Everyone deals with it, believer or not, and for it the kingdom of heaven suffers violence. So, in this regard, John and his disciples were no better off than you are, and you no worse off than they were. John needed to hear the message to repent. His disciples needed to hear the message to repent. I need to hear the message to repent. You need to hear the message to repent.

And you all need to see and hear what else John proclaimed: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Jesus pointed John and his disciples to what He had done compared to the prophecies of the Messiah. That same thing can be and is done today. Do you doubt who Jesus says He is? Look at what was prophesied of Him and look at what He has done. Doubt that He has really done it? Well, there are thousands of eye witnesses of His resurrection, having also seen Him die on the cross. These all bear witness that Jesus is the Man, the Son of God, who died and rose again and lives forevermore. Jesus is who He says He is, and He declares to you that He is your Savior!

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It has come and He has done exactly what He said He would do. Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. Yes, He will come again. Therefore, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He will come on the clouds of judgment with the call of the trumpet, at which time He will gather you to Himself, because, for His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.