**Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand**

Based on [Matthew 3:1-12](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt3.1-12)

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The Second Sunday in Advent

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John the Baptizer was a prophet; and he was the last prophet to preach about the coming of the Christ. Christ is the rightful King of Creation, and John was sent to prepare the way for the King to come. And so he was baptizing in the Jordan River saying “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

There is a new kingdom coming to rule us, and we need to be prepared for it. Most of us probably don’t have a good understanding of what it would be like to live in a place and experience there a total regime change. Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau are entirely different Prime Ministers, but a transition to different parties is not different kingdoms.

To understand the coming of an entirely new and different kingdom, a better illustration would be to imagine the expansion of an empire. Imagine if Russia, or China, or more realistically Islamic countries came to Canada, overthrew the government and established Sharia Law. And imagine you knew nothing about it until it was here. You would not be prepared, and you would likely not survive under the new rule.

The kingdom of heaven is not the slavery and oppression of Sharia Law; it is the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. And His kingdom is coming, expanding from heaven to earth. Its first infiltration was in the womb of Mary, where the divinely chosen king was conceived. Some thirty-years later, the king would go to the Jordan River to be Baptized by John, and there his reign, his ministry, would begin.

John preaches in order to prepare the Jews to receive the kingdom as the Messiah spreads it throughout Israel. His message is that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and in order to prepare for the coming kingdom all need to repent. This is because (1) the kingdom of heaven will judge all men, (2) the kingdom of heaven judges impartially, and (3) the kingdom of heaven will bring with it the Holy Spirit and the fire of God’s wrath.

First, John preaches that repentance is necessary to prepare for the coming kingdom, *because the king will judge all men*. There will be none who live outside of this kingdom or live safely outside of its jurisdiction. The creator Himself is coming to take back what rightfully belongs to him. He will reclaim all of creation that was lost in the fall, and judge those who stole it away from Him. And some will stand in the judgment and be save, and some will not stand in the judgment, and fall.

Those who will fall are the hypocrites. When John sees the Pharisees and the Saducees coming to his baptism, he says, “**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.**” This is an extremely harsh rebuke. Hypocrisy is no light matter. I have heard it said that, if someone accuses the church of being full of hypocrites, a clever retort is “there’s always room for one more.” This is not a good witness. The church has no authority to baptize or forgive hypocrites. Never in the scriptures are followers of Christ called hypocrites. Christians--despite their own failures and flaws and constant need for repentance—Christians love Christ and strive to keep his commandments and are sorrowful and seek forgiveness when they fail. But a hypocrite is not sorrowful. A hypocrite is a person who only pretends to love God’s Word and keep His commandments to gain status before men, but really in his heart despises them.

Hypocrites will not enter the kingdom of heaven, because hypocrites are unrepentant sinners. And though they will at times sneak their way into a Christian church, or hole themselves up there for lack of discipline, Jesus calls them wolves in sheep’s clothing. This is especially true with false pastors (Matt. 7:15). And though they wear sheep’s clothing on the outside, you will be able to recognize them by their fruits (Matt. 7:16). In other words, they won’t talk or act like true sheep, they won’t keep God’s Word.

Even true sheep will fail to keep Christ’s word perfectly; but the difference is they submit to being shepherded to repentance by the word of Christ. They aren’t offended by a call to amend their life and conform it to the kingdom of heaven. But hypocrites persist in their error, and in stubborn self-righteousness declare themselves to be right with God on their own account. So, John calls them the offspring of vipers, harmless to you when you stay out of their way, but if you approach them with God’s Word and expose their pretense, tear down their false front they work so very hard to put up; they will coil and strike and hurl all sorts of poison and false accusations at you, rather than suffer to amend their life and repent.

This is why John’s rebuke of them is so sharp and so earnest. In outbursts of anger and malice against their call to repentance, they murder Christ’s sheep, who turn the other cheek and await their reward in heaven. But their rage will fail when the king comes in full glory to stand and accuses them. Their coil and strike will not harm Him. He will tear down their façade and judge them. They will be eternally weeping and gnashing their teeth, swallowing the venom they once spit upon the bride of Christ, and indeed on Christ himself as they led him to the cross to be sheered. Their condemnation is just. And unless they repent before the king comes to judge, they will fall.

However, those who bear fruit in keeping with repentance, they will stand in the judgment. Where there is ripe fruit on the vine, there’s a living tree that produced it. So too when there are good works there is living faith in the Son of God. He will come in order to find faith on earth. He will not find it by looking at the membership roster of self-identifying “Christian” churches. He will not go door to door and ask people if they think they have faith and take their word for it. Neither will he judge people by looking directly into their heart. On the last day Jesus will see one’s heart by looking at what they have done. And those who have done good works and those who have done hypocritical works will be as obvious to him as separating sheep from goats. So, John rightly says to prepare for the coming kingdom with repentance.

Second, John preaches that repentance is necessary to prepare for the coming kingdom, *because the king will judge impartially*. The coming king will have no regard for earthly status and reputation. **Things that often people take earthly pride in are nothing to him.** Bloodlines, family ties, baptism certificates, church membership cards, wealth, personal talents—these things are praised at family reunions, fundraisers and eulogies. But Jesus says, “What is praised among men is an abomination before God.”

John warns the hypocrites, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance and do not say, “**We have Abraham as our father**.” Abraham was the father of Israel, God’s chosen people, but being genetically related to him means nothing. You may have been born into the true visible church on earth; the confessional Lutheran church; but when Jesus comes again the church you were born and baptized in is irrelevant without repentance. When the king comes, do not presume to say to him “**I have a certificate of Baptism from the Lutheran Church**”, he knows, he was the one who baptized you there. He poured the Holy Spirit upon you that moment making you both His child and a saint. If you denied that baptism, and in your life rejected everything it signifies, your certificate is worthless. The fact that you still have the certificate gives you earthly status, but no status in heaven. Repent.

The coming kingdom of heaven is impartial. It does not give those with more status on earth more status in heaven. In fact the incredible thing is that he gives heaven only to those who will receive it freely, as poor miserable dead status-less sinners. John continues, “**I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham**.” Just as God in the beginning, raised up Adam to life from dirt; so God can create from stones, children for himself. Repentance is a return to dust, so that God--working with the most simple and lifeless and hopeless materials, with you whose earthly status is mud or at least regarded worthless to you—by pouring His Spirit on you, God will do the impossible and make a dead people alive again and holy unto himself prepared for the judgment.

Finally, John preaches that repentance is necessary to prepare for the coming kingdom, *because the king will pour out the Holy Spirit and the fire of God’s wrath*.

The kingdom of God comes to bring peace, and mercy, and life. The king will judge in equity and righteousness. He is coming, and he will to find faithful people on earth before he returns, because He makes it happen Himself. When the Christ came, he suffered, died on the cross and gave up His Spirit and poured that same Holy Spirit upon the church. “**He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our savior**” (Titus 3:4-6). The kingdom will come, and the king will judge you according to your works, but you who have been baptized and believe the word, you were saved then and there.

An illustration: you were legally authorized to operate a motor vehicle on the day you got your drivers license. Any time after that, a police officer may pull you over ask to see your license and registration, you show it to him and he judges you righteous, that is right with the law. So too, you were saved, right with God, the moment God gave you faith (your license if you will), and you who remain in that faith will have it with you when the kingdom of God comes, and he will “pull you over” and judge you according to the faithfulness he produced in you.

In this life, while Christ is ascended and his kingdom is not visible, there are those who live in this creation without faith or fear of God. Just as there are those who drive around without a license, they get away with it for now. But someday they will get pulled over, and if they do not have it they will be judged guilty and punished.

So the king rules both with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The fire will come someday and it will be terrible to behold, but God is not worried. The angels in heaven are not wringing their hands about all the people who are destined for destruction. Rather they are rejoicing over one single sinner who repents. One sinner. **The kingdom of heaven is coming and that is Good News, because that is a kingdom of holiness, peace and mercy, unlike you’ve ever experienced from day one of your life. And you have been prepared for it through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.** Put on that faith every day, repent, receive God’s mercy and go and be a blessing to your neighbor. In that way you are ready for the regime change, because you are already living in the love of God.