

“Repent!”

Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday in Advent + December 4, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some events that happen in life are so big that in the future we mark things according to them. There is the “before” and the “after”: “Oh, that was before Grandpa died.” “Oh, that happened after we moved here.” “That was before they put the Interstate in.” “That was before the tornado.” Things were headed in one direction and then they, under the providence of God, went down an entirely different path. Think of the “before” and “after” pictures in the ads for various weight-loss programs.

The text today brings to mind this kind of “before” and “after” picture. For the nation of Israel, with the coming of John the Baptist, things would never be the same. After John announced the coming kingdom of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, things would never be the same for the nation. What is more, God was working a change in the hearts and minds of many individual people. It is a change called “repentance” in the word of God. It is an ongoing process, not just a one-time happening for the Christian. Every day God is working such a change. Every day we remember the “before” life, cross it out, and seek the “after” way of living. Today we would like to speak of our life “before” Christ and the life “after” Christ. That’s what “repentance” is all about: it changes (1) first, how we look at ourselves, and (2) secondly, how we look at Jesus

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First, what are the *before* and *after* changes that we see in ourselves when it comes to genuine repentance? John urges the people, in accord with ancient prophecy, to prepare the way for the Lord: “Make His paths straight” (v.3). Here and there through the countryside you can see where a road has been straightened or shortened, the way has been made smoother and more convenient. The modern traveler wants the shortest, quickest route. The Lord urges us to allow Him to take the shortest path to bring us to repentance. *Before* repentance, we look at ourselves and make excuses. We seek to justify ourselves. We try to block off certain avenues in our heart and hide from God the things that we have done. We try to fool ourselves and in the process think

that we can fool God. *After* repentance we open our heart to God and say, “This is who I am. I have daily sinned and deserve Your punishment. Have mercy upon me, a sinner.” Don’t make the Lord take the winding road to get into your heart. Give Him a straight shot.

Note the appearance of John as he attracted people from all over the countryside out to the wilderness: “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (v.4). Why the strange get-up? The Lord had said he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, who “wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist” (2 Kings 1:8). The last two verses of the Old Testament show this: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Malachi 4:5-6). Remember when the Lord sent the angel Gabriel to John’s father with a message about John’s birth: “He will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:15-17). Later Jesus Himself explained – and we will hear this in next Sunday’s Gospel: “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:13-14). Elijah was a powerful preacher of repentance in a time of great idolatry in Israel. *Before* listening to His word and coming to genuine repentance we put ourselves first. We supposed that we can form our own standards and have it our own way. *After* repentance we admit: “The LORD, He is God. I will be judged by His Law, not my own system of beliefs.”

Why the strict diet? John wanted to convey to the people that this was not a matter of fun and games. This was serious business, the eternal destiny of souls was at stake. So it is today that the preaching of the word of God is to be done in such a way to set it apart from the trivial, humorous things of everyday life. When we confess our sins, we are not only stating what we see in ourselves,

but admitting that we believe what we read in the word of God about the human condition. God says it; we admit that it is true: I am a poor miserable sinner who has transgressed against the commandments of God. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). *Before* genuine repentance we try to say that we are not so bad; *after* repentance we admit, “Your word is true, Lord, when it describes my sinful and lost condition.”

Repentance is more than coming into this place and saying some words with our lips. It is a change of heart that the Lord Himself must continually work in us. Sin is an atrocious, disgusting, wretched thing in the eyes of God--every manifestation of sin, even in our thoughts--and the only way to deal with sin is to come out with it in confession. Look how John scolds the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism: “You brood of vipers!” (v.7). Those Pharisees were some of the most religious people the world has ever known. They put very strict rules on every aspect of their lives, and yet they had not truly repented. *Before* true repentance we think that the outward performance of religious duties will get us right with God. *After* true repentance we know that all these things we do are in heartfelt thanksgiving to God for His salvation.

Before true repentance we think that we can just say the words of the confession and nothing has to change. God sees the hearts of those who claim to be repentant and knows who is telling the truth and who is not. Where the fruit of repentance is missing, true repentance is also missing. The man who claims to be sorry for hurting his brother, but will then do nothing to show love or make peace to him, lacks the fruits of true repentance. *After* true repentance we are filled with gratitude to God and we joyfully seek to change the way we live, showing the fruits of repentance. It comes from the knowledge that God has forgiven us for Jesus’ sake. The deeds should be corresponding to the change in heart.

Judgment is near. The ax is already at the foot of the tree. The woodsman has it all lined up and is ready to swing the first blow. For the ancient people of Jerusalem, the ax came hard in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the city. For those of us living without Christ, the ax could come at

any time. This is why now is the time to turn away from our sins in sorrow. In His great love for us, the Lord calls to us, “Repent!” *Before* genuine repentance we thought we could put off confessing our sins. *After* repentance we recognize now is the time to turn from sin.

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There is another part to repentance, namely, a change in the way we look at the Lord Jesus Christ. *Before* repentance, we don’t think we need Jesus. Oh, we may know some historical facts about Him, but it all seems pretty distant and far away from us. *After* repentance, we look on the Lord Jesus Christ as our only hope and our Rescuer from the hell that we deserve.

John spoke of this when he said that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (v.2). That means that Christ the King is here for us, ready to save and rescue, defend, and rule over us. Compare the Lord’s Prayer in the Catechism. “Thy Kingdom come” means: “The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also. How does God’s kingdom come? God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (Luther’s Small Catechism, 1986 translation, CPH). Christ is our King, and *after* true repentance – the way we live each day as Christians – we see that Jesus has opened up God’s Kingdom to us. We rejoice in Him and trust that He has made us part of the rule and reign of God on earth. We are confident that He will also make us part of His heavenly kingdom of glory.

Before or without this new way of thinking it seemed to us that Jesus could not help us, that we were on our own, that there was no hope for us. But John the mighty preacher pointed to Jesus and said there was One coming who is “mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (v.11). The Lord Jesus was stronger. He could do what John could not do. He would save and rescue the people from the coming punishment. The Lord Jesus is able to save. The Apostle Paul explains that the power of God is seen in the cross of Jesus Christ: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews

and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25).

John is the one who repeatedly pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). John understood that Jesus would be that One upon whom would be laid the sins of the world, the One who would give Himself as a sacrifice to remove the sins of the world. *After* true repentance we marvel at the grace of God and say: “Jesus, the Lamb of God, has taken away my sins.”

Shortly after this text we read that Jesus Himself came and was baptized, in order to fulfill all righteousness. He identified Himself with the sinners who were coming to be baptized. He was numbered with transgressors even on the cross. His resurrection from the dead demonstrates that His work was entirely pleasing and acceptable to God the Father. *After* coming to a repentant heart we rejoice in the washing away of our sins through the waters of Holy Baptism.

After true repentance we see Jesus as the one who will safely care for us forever, like grains of wheat gathered into His barn. In Jesus Christ we will escape the unquenchable fire and instead have unending joys awaiting us in the presence of our Father.

This is the “before” and “after” of true repentance! Amen.