

<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea <sup>2</sup>and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." <sup>3</sup>This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.' "

<sup>4</sup>John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup>Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup>The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup>"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray: Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled  
Within my heart, made clean and new,  
A quiet chamber kept for you. Amen. (CW #38 v.13)

Dear fellow redeemed, brothers and sisters in Christ,  
Repentant followers and disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Fresh fruit is generally well received in our household. At times when a certain kind of fruit shows up on sale in store ads, we enjoy a new variety. Fruit is a rich gift from God. As a testimony to God's creation and divine providence, we know that apples come from trees bear. This is because that is what God made apple trees to do. Orange trees bear oranges and not apples because that is what God made orange trees to do. And pear trees produce pears because that is what God made pear trees to do.

Today, John the Baptist uses this picture of a fruit tree to impress upon us what God's people will do. Through John's sermon to us it is made clear that repentant Christians will produce fruits of faith because that is what God made Christians to do. This resounding truth must not change. Therefore, we must hear and appreciate John's message. The theme of which is made clear:

**"Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near".**

1. Repentance starts with the confession of our sins.
2. Repentance will show itself with the fruits of faith.

1.

As we now consider these words of John the Baptist, let us imagine him as a guest preacher in our church today. Having a guest preacher here at St. Mark's is not a foreign idea. When your pastor must be out of town on vacation, we will often times have a

different pastor of our doctrinal fellowship step in. So let us hear John's words and consider him as our guest preacher. What kind of preacher and pastor would he be?

Picture him as described for us in our text.

- He has isolated himself to the desert and wilderness regions.
- He draws little attention to himself with fame or fortune.
- He certainly did not seek celebrity status.
- He was content with the modest clothing of a garment made of camels hair along with a leather belt around his waist.
- His diet hardly consisted of steak or lobster, but locusts (perhaps dried in the sun) along with wild honey.
- His circle of friends was likely small, having isolated himself to the wilderness (although we know for certain that he did have his disciples and followers).
- Concerning his sermon which was preached again and again, it did not change much at all -- even now 2000 years later. His message remains the same, being "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near"!

John the Baptist lived this way and preached in this manner, in order keep all attention away from himself. He preferred to be a nameless voice calling out in the desert. His mission was to point every person in the direction of Christ Jesus. Of Jesus, John is noted as saying, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (Mark 1:8). And, "He (that is Jesus) must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

John's emphasis on repentance is something that we truly need to put into practice on a regular basis. It was Martin Luther who said within the opening words of his 95 Theses, "The Christian's entire life must be a repentance". He even likened it to breathing. Thus, we exhale our sin and inhale God's mercy and forgiveness.

Such an attitude of repentance is pointed out as an indispensable and most necessary aspect to our lives. One way in which John highlighted this fact was by using his existence in the desert as a picture of what all people are like by nature. We are like a parched desert full of deadness and sin. John's hearers, like us, were in able and incapable of producing living fruit. Our only fruit is the fruit of sin, namely death. Yes, in too many ways we have been like that desert, dead in sin needing to be enriched with life so that we might produce fruit.

Surely in the spring time, we would think it ridiculous for any farmer to cut a row in the gravel road we call Bardwell Drive, and to go ahead and plant a row of corn. This would be an absolute waste of his time and money to expect a crop to produce fruit in the midst of a gravel road. For not only would nothing grow do to the traffic, but especially because there is precious little nourishment for any crop in a path of stones.

Since we need to be enriched soil, our God makes us new and healthy through repentance. He alone turns our deadness into life. Such repentance needs to be defined, and can be summarized as the course of three changes within us. There is the changing of the mind, the changing of the heart and a changing of the life we live.

This changing of the mind occurs when we are brought face to face with our sin. We come to realize that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We have daily failed to measure up to God's demands and his expectations for us. Therefore, we only deserve his wrath and his punishment. This changing of the mind leads us to sorrow and regret over the sins committed. This is also what we call contrition. Each one of us further realizes that we have no excuse that will wash with God. Just as David states in Psalm 51, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done, what is evil in your sight." In repentance, I must learn to take ownership of my sins, and accountability for my actions. I must not blame others, the circumstance or my upbringing. I will not even say, "The devil made me do it".

Next there will be a change of the heart. At that time, I will not be looking to myself for the remedy of sin. I will not look to others for their opinion or advice as to how I can justify my sinful actions. I will not seek justification by comparison, by saying, "Others have done worse than me", or "Everyone else is doing it". The self-made remedy of trying to make up for my sins or to cancel them out with good behavior, will not work. We must not think of our sins as expenses in our checkbook register that we can payoff or build up credit against, on our own. A real changing of the heart will not look to itself, but look to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and payment for sin. We, in no way can erase the bad that we have done. Christ alone can clean the slate. Such a changed heart will trust and depend upon him to make us holy in his sight.

This is precisely what John's work entailed. His work was extremely important in preparing people for meeting the answer to their sin. John's hearers would soon see the tangible proof of God's love and mercy. This involves the recorded history of Jesus' birth, life and death. This would supercede even Jesus' miracles. For Jesus' own preaching would also be unprecedented. The Gospels repeatedly tell us that that Jesus' preaching was superior. For, he preached with authority, unlike their teachers of the law. Jesus was the only answer to sin. Jesus is still the single answer to sin.

Jesus alone turns us from sinners to saints. Such a changing of the mind and this changing of the heart involves a complete change, in order for anyone to enter the Kingdom of heaven. God's kingdom is a holy and perfect place. John the Baptist was not talking about a kingdom of earth, but the Kingdom of heaven. We must be made completely new to enter in. Jesus told Nicodemus in John chapter 3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. . . I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

## 2.

In other words, a refurbishing won't cut it. A refurbishing is something like what we hope to see happen here at St. Mark's. That, God willing, will be a building addition to address our space needs. That will involve the improvement of what already exists. But when it comes to God making us new, there is nothing about us that is good to work with. He must make us completely new and holy. For, by nature, there is nothing about us that is acceptable in God's eyes. So we need this total change, the changing of the mind, the changing of the heart and now also a changing of the life we live. Praise God that he works this change in us through his Law and Gospel message and through Holy Baptism.

This changing of my life will permeate and influence all that I think, say and do. It will demonstrate an attitude of serving the Lord, not because I have to but because I want to. This attitude was misunderstood by those Pharisees and Sadducees, mentioned in our text. By giving John an audience they felt that they did God a favor. By even being baptized, they likely saw that as some additional good deed in their favor. Finally, John makes clear that they also had a sinful pride about the blood running through their veins. They demonstrated a false sense of security in thinking that since they were descendants of Abraham, they already had a foothold in heaven.

This same kind of thinking is tempting for us and just as dangerous. Let us not think that because we grew up as good Lutherans we are God's favorites. Let us not view our own attendance here in church, our own baptism or our kneeling at the Lord's altar as some favor or good deed that makes us acceptable before God. But, in fact, God is the one who is doing us the favor. He LETS US worship before his gates with thanksgiving. He LETS US become his children and heirs unto eternal life through Holy Baptism. He LETS US receive Jesus' true body and blood as guests at his table.

John the Baptist has today kept before our eyes the importance of repentance, while the Kingdom of heaven is near. It is important that we daily put into practice this changing of the mind, the changing of the heart, and a changing of the life that we live. This will result in the regular production of fruit in keeping with repentance.

- God's guideline for living will be our guideline for living.
- God's way will be our way.
- His definition for the Christian life will be our definition for the Christian life.

In closing, John emphasized the importance of Baptism as a time that we should look back upon, as a time when we became God's new creation. Jesus would later establish this act of Baptism as a powerful gift of God's grace. At Jesus' command, we are assured that this is a means by which we will continue to make disciples of all nations. The gift of the Holy Spirit is still imparted upon all who receive this Sacrament. Thereby, we also know, as John tells us, that God alone can and will see the genuineness of our repentance and faith. Nothing is hidden from him. May we take seriously these words of John to us: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". Rejoice that Jesus still works that change in your heart and mine through a Spirit-worked repentance. The Bible remains the tool by which that still happens today. His message leads us to see our daily need for his love and also the complete fulfillment of his promise to love us, in Christ Jesus our Lord. This love is without any bounds or limits. Through the Scriptures alone, we hear about his unmatched love for us and also see the proof of that love by Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Such love will sustain us now and when his kingdom shall come.

Amen.