

5 December 2004
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“From Wilderness to Paradise”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you want to know Jesus *rightly*, you must first know your sin. This is not optional. For in order to know the person of Jesus, you must know of His work. You cannot separate the two. Jesus comes to be the Saviour, and if you do not know Him as your Saviour, then you do not know Him rightly.

And today, in our day and age, this is important. For there are many who claim to know Jesus, who invoke His Name (especially during this holiday season!), and who claim Him as their own, but they do not know Him *rightly*. They know Him not as Saviour, but as something else. As a teacher, a leader, an example, an inspiration – many things. And while Jesus may be all of those things in some regard, they are not who He is. For who He is is *Saviour*. That is what His Name means. That is why He came. And that is how we must know Him, if we are to know Him.

And so during this season of Advent, as we look forward to the birth of Jesus, we do not begin with the cute and gentle baby in the manger, we begin with ourselves and our sin. For this is step one. And so that we might do that, onto the stage comes John the Baptist. He is the one who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus, and he does so by preaching repentance – which, we could say, is nothing other than the acknowledgement of our sin. And when we acknowledge our sin, and confess and repent, then we are prepared. Prepared to know Jesus. To know and receive Him as Saviour. To receive the gift of forgiveness He comes to bring.

So John the Baptist comes. We hear of him today. ***“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.”*** He does not come where we are comfortable, he comes in the wilderness, for the wilderness is the place of sin. The wilderness is dry, and dead, and nothingness. It is a hard and difficult place, the very opposite of the world that in the beginning, God created. For in the beginning was Eden. Paradise. Life, perfection, well-watered gardens, trees, and an abundance of everything. The wilderness is the result of sin. It is the place where Adam had to live after sin. It is

the “wild” place. The place of thorns and thistles, of toil and hard work, of dryness and death and separation.

And in this wilderness, John preaches. ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** At hand, that is, within reach. It is close, do you not see it? . . . Well, many did not see it, and still do not see it. Even today. Even you and me. Because we have been blinded, by the things of this world. Blinded to the wilderness that we live in. For we are living in nice houses, with plenty of food and water, a TV in every room, nice clothes, and so many luxuries that many people around the world can only imagine. Behold, John, we have so much! . . . Yes, we *have* (i.e., possess things). But what *are* we? . . . John’s words still pierce. They pierce our souls, and pierce through the good-looking veneers we put on our lives. Repent. He speaks the truth. Things are not as good as they look, are they? There is a wilderness of sin in each of us – things and expectations and situations and pursuits that dry us out and kill us. What is yours? Perhaps it is the wilderness of addiction and pain, of guilt and failure. The wilderness of separation and isolation and loneliness. The wilderness of despair and depression. There is the wilderness of excess, hollow pleasures, phoniness, and keeping up with Joneses. The wilderness of pride and indignation, of arrogance and greed. The wilderness of competition and achievement and advancement and popularity. How many more? What is yours? How many are yours?

John is right. Repent. I am dried up. I am in need. Hiding our sin doesn’t work. That just makes the dryness and hardness and death even worse. So he calls to us to do something else. To come out to the wilderness, to spend some time in the wilderness and be stripped of all frills and phoniness and pretenses, stripped of our pretending that everything is good – that I’m okay and you’re okay – stripped of everything we hide behind. Even our own efforts. That I can overcome whatever is bothering me. You can’t. I can’t. That’s a mirage. There is only one way out of the wilderness and back into the garden, back into paradise: and that is to die. To die in repentance, so that Jesus can raise you to a new life. And when Jesus raises you, then you know Him rightly. Then you know Him as Saviour.

And we see this with John, for those who repent are given the gift of water – baptism! Them and their families. And how precious is water in the wilderness! How precious is this water in the wilderness of sin! The dryness of their sin and the hardness of their heart are soaked in those baptismal waters, and they are raised from their death of sin to a new life. They receive God’s water of life and begin to live. No longer hiding, no longer pretending – but living in the reality of sins forgiven. . . . And this is what has happened to us. Whether you were baptized as an infant, a child, a teen, or an adult, God’s living water has rescued you from the wilderness. He has washed away your sin and given you

a new life. Watered by Him to live and grow. And while this “watering” happens but once in our lives, we continue to return to it. Repenting and receiving forgiveness. Repenting and rising. Repenting and drinking and growing in the life God has graciously given us.

And this wonderful picture of new life is what the prophet Isaiah also painted for us today. For he too speaks of death and resurrection, of wilderness and new life. He just uses a different picture – but it is the same reality. For Isaiah shows us the result of Jesus’ work for us, the result of His death and resurrection, and it is *a Paradise restored*. Restored by the One who comes as **“the shoot from the stump of Jesse.”** And so Isaiah starts with a picture of the sin in which we live, for what is a stump but a tree that has been cut down and is now dead? That was what had, in fact, happened to the kingdom of Israel. At the time that Jesse’s son David and his son Solomon reigned on the throne of Israel, the kingdom was at its pinnacle. It was like a great and spreading tree. It was great and glorious and safe and blessed and everyone had all they wanted and needed. But while the outward appearance was grand and glorious, inside the picture was quite different. The people were rotting and decaying in sin. They fell away from God and began welcoming and worshipping other gods, until for this idolatry, Israel was cut down, its kingdom destroyed. All that was left was a stump. A tree, a garden, cut down.

And yet, from this stump, in this wilderness, life was about to appear. A shoot, a branch, from the stump. New growth, new life. The garden would grow again, and paradise would be restored from this growth. The Spirit of God and righteousness would again rule. Peace in the forgiveness of sin would stop the destruction of sin. A little child would lead them. Indeed, the littlest of children. Born in a manger, surrounded by the animals of His creating, under the stars that He was keeping in their courses. Into our wilderness of sin, the Son of God came and lived. He is the branch, the shoot, born to restore paradise. And in His life and death with us here, and then in rising to life again, this is what He has done! He has defeated death, overcome the wilderness of sin, and planted the Garden again, with His body as the seed and His blood as the water, planted in the grave. And three days later, there was life again. Resurrection. New life. Life that sin and death cannot overcome anymore. The life that God intended for us from the very beginning.

And this life He wants for you. He wants to give to you. For He who raised Himself from death is certainly able to raise you! From the death of your body, yes; but more from the death of your sin *already now*. To live with Him. To grow with Him. No longer dry and dead, but well watered and fed. For the truth is that in Him, we are part of that tree of life that is green and living and bearing much fruit. Apart from Him, we are the dry, lifeless trees that are destined for the axe and the fire.

And so today John comes and is calling you to life. Not the same old life, but to die and rise with Christ to a new life. And so John is calling, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** At hand, that is, within reach. Indeed, it is here for you, and touching you. Giving you life as Jesus’ word of forgiveness touches your ears and enters your hearts. Feeding you as Jesus’ body and blood touches your dry lips and tongue and renews and strengthens your faith. ***“The kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*** Do you see it? Come and receive Him, and know Him rightly. As your Saviour. As the One who has restored Paradise, and has prepared it for you. For though we are not there yet, we will be. For in Jesus there is no wilderness, only life. Full life. Abundant life.

Today John is calling to you. Calling with a message of hope, a message of peace, a message of forgiveness. The message of a Saviour. So that as we prepare to welcome Him, in His birth and in His coming again, we will be prepared. Prepared to know Him rightly. For in Him we have life and hope. In Him we have life and salvation. In Him, we have the promise of Paradise restored. So come and repent, for we can! Come and repent, for there still is time! Come and ***repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.