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“The Coming One: A Saviour From Sin”

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.

Some of you are old enough to remember the Emergency Broadcast System. Every once in a while, on your radio or TV, whatever you were listening to or watching (and it was usually your favorite show) would be interrupted by the Emergency Broadcast System. I don't remember there ever actually being a real emergency that it was used for - instead there would always be these words: *This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. This is only a test.* And then a loud, sharp, shrill tone would sound for approximately 30 seconds. It was really annoying but, we were told, important.

Today it's still around, but it's been changed. It's now called the Emergency Alert System, and it's been toned down greatly. Now, instead of that long, loud, shrill tone, there is only a series of short bursts. It doesn't last as long, it's not nearly as annoying, and it's easier to ignore.

Well, think of John the Baptist as the first century Emergency Broadcast System. For he came on the scene to interrupt people's lives and announce to them something of great importance: ***The kingdom of heaven is at hand! So repent!*** And it was not a test, it was the real thing. And he was loud and sharp and shrill and would not be ignored. And evidently people paid attention, because as we heard ***Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.***

But just like the Emergency Broadcast System changed and was toned down, so it seems has been John and his message. Oh, we still have Advent and John still shows up on this week every year, but he's been toned down a bit, hasn't he? And I wonder if he's been toned down too much. His call for repentance doesn't sound so loud and sharp and shrilly in our world anymore, and so he's not as annoying and easy to ignore. Maybe too easy. Maybe we need to crank him back up a bit . . .

Because we need his message, as much of an interruption as it is into many people's favorite season, this season of excitement and joy, as much of an interruption as it is into your lives. Because it's important. Because living in this world is like being the proverbial frog in the kettle. The water gradually heats up and cooks him without his even knowing it, and in the same way the sin in the world all around us gradually cooks us without our even knowing it. We grow accustomed to the sin in the world and the sin in us and maybe don't even notice it anymore. What used to shock us no longer does.

What used to alarm us we've become resigned to. What used to be matters for correction are now simply called indiscretion, youth, mistakes, goofs, choice, freedom. We think it doesn't matter when we do these things. We think it doesn't matter when we don't do what we should - for someone else will, right?

So we need John to come along and interrupt our comfortable lives - maybe especially at this time of the year - and sound his loud, sharp, shrill ***repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*** For your sin is dangerous. Or as we prayed in the collect last Sunday, we need deliverance *from the threatening perils of our sins*. But we don't see sin that way anymore, do we? We don't see the peril of living this way because, for the most part, everything *looks* okay, and I *feel* okay . . .

Well there were some in John's day who thought that too. Those who were not among the crowd that went out to John to be baptized, to be forgiven, to confess their sins. John called them a ***brood of vipers***, those who were comfortable with the way things were and didn't think they needed to repent. He sounded the alarm to them too. *Don't be so sure*. Don't assume that just because you *look* okay and *feel* okay that you *are* okay. The water temperature in your kettle may be pretty high.

And I wonder if that's not really the danger for us today . . . that the brood of vipers isn't more how you and I act today. We who so gorge ourselves on Christmas treats but starve our souls of the Word. We who send so many Christmas cards but so few prayers. We who like to decorate our houses but not our lives with good works. We who put so much time and thought into shopping but so little into confession. *If John were here today, what do you think he would say to you?*

Well he is here today, and his message is the same: ***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***

And quite literally was the kingdom of heaven at hand when John said those words, for it was imminent that the King of heaven would be at the end of and under John's hand in the Jordan as John baptized Him. And you know the rest of that story, as after Jesus was baptized He was anointed by and filled with the Holy Spirit, as Isaiah described for us today. For Jesus was that ***shoot which would come up from the stump of Jesse***. The stump of Jesse which means the remnants of what once was a great and glorious kingdom until it got cooked - or chopped down, in this case - in the kettle of its sin. But from this stump, this sawed-off, lifeless looking lump, life and hope would come. A branch would begin to grow. From Jesse, David's father, and then David, the Messiah would come. Who would have a spirit not of this world, but ***the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.***

The Spirit we need.

And the Spirit, John says, that He will give to you, for the one coming after John, the one John has come to point to, ***will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire***. To cleanse and purify you, to give to you and work in you exactly what you need. That you be filled with His Spirit. That you may delight in the Lord, not in sin. That you may have His peace, not worry. That you may be led by this shoot, this branch, this little child who, Isaiah says, restores paradise.

The people listened, repented, and were baptized by John. But since we cannot go to John or to the Jordan, but the message is the same for us today, God has brought them here to you. The Jesus who was baptized in the Jordan by John for you, now baptizes you with His Holy Spirit and the purifying fire of His forgiveness, to rescue you from the threatening peril of your sins, from the kettle that keeps getting hotter and hotter. For you see, we don't need to become better swimmers, *we need to be rescued*.

And so when Jesus entered the Jordan and was baptized, He was jumping into the kettle with you. And that was not just a man jumping into the kettle with you, but your God. For Jesus was not only the shoot or branch from the stump of Jesse, but also, Isaiah says, ***the root of Jesse*** - the source, the One from whom Jesse and David and his kingdom came: God Himself. And so the root becomes a branch, God becomes man, and is born for you, baptized for you, and then goes to the cross for you, where the fire of sin is turned up to full blast against Him, that dying with us in our sin, we might rise with Him in His resurrection. And that's exactly what happens in your baptism - it is the hand of your resurrected Saviour pulling you out of the kettle of sin and back to life again with Him. That you not die but live, and live forever.

So what John is saying to you today is: *don't jump back into the kettle!* For some do. And even we do. Sometimes doing a cannonball back in, sometimes dipping our toe in and going back in gradually. And it's so easy because satan's always there trying to convince us to *c'mon in!* The water's *just fine*.

But he lies. Always. And so we need John, we need our Emergency Broadcast System to sound that loud, sharp, shrill tone again for us and say no! ***Repent!*** Remember that you are baptized. You may not remember the water hitting your head or the day it happened, but your Saviour does. He remembers that day He made you His child and gave you His Spirit and forgave you your sins. He remembers, and those promises once given to you are still good - He will not renege on them. So repent, or in other words, come back to that day and receive again His loving care, His forgiveness, and His life.

And then, John adds, ***bear fruit in keeping with repentance***. Which perhaps we could say really means this: *live knowing the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. Live not in sin but as the child of God you are, and live as the child of God you are *for others*. Which means celebrate Christmas, enjoy all that this season brings, but at the same time knowing that Christmas may not actually come in the way that you expect. For just as Jesus came as

that babe in the manger, so He will come again for you, and that at any time now. The kingdom of heaven is still at hand. And when it comes - or better to say, when HE comes - John wants you to be ready. He's not here to be a sourpuss or a killjoy in the midst of a joyous season, but to be that loud, sharp, shrill sound that grabs your attention, that you may celebrate and rejoice rightly this season. That Christmas not be just a holiday, but a holy day. That you celebrate not just a birth, but an incarnation. That you rejoice not just in a child, but in a Saviour. That we both sing and sing of HIM. That we both rejoice and rejoice in HIM. And that now we both feast and feast on HIM, His Body and Blood that is now prepared for us. That as we prayed today, our hearts be stirred up -that we be prepared and ready for when He comes again in glory.

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