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Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand!”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13

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

It is hard to overestimate the amount of excitement there was in *Jerusalem and Judea and all the region about the Jordan* when John the Baptist appeared on the scene and started preaching. Because it had been generations since something like this had happened. No ones grandparents or even great-grandparents, no one alive at that time, had seen something like this. It had been some 400 years - or about as long ago as the Pilgrims came to this land on the Mayflower - since a prophet had come. The words of the prophet Amos had come true. The words that said: “*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord*” (Amos 8:11). A 400 year famine and drought.

But now a propet had come again. The famine, the drought, was over. God is speaking again! The word spread like the wildfires we see out west or in Tennessee. And so the people come flowing out from all quarters - from the cities, from the country, the entire region, to hear what God has to say to them.

And what does He say? “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*”

We’ll get to that in a moment - but first, I think it fair to say that the same kind of thing is happening today. At this time of the year there is a high level of excitement that Christmas is coming. But the holiday, not the holy day. It hasn’t even for us been 400 days and yet people are flowing out from all quarters - from the cities, from the country, the entire region, to the Jordan of our mall and stores, both brick and mortar and cyber. Because the call has gone out once again - not to repent, but to buy. And not buy just gifts, but if you listen closely . . . **to buy happiness**. That’s the promise. That’s the hope. That’s the expectation.

So that mall parking lot full of cars with no more spaces to be had - that’s what the Jordan was like in the days of John the Baptist. And the people who went out didn’t buy, but *received* a gift: the gift of repentance. Which doesn’t sound like much of a gift, right? But it is. Because with the gift of repentance comes the promise of forgiveness. The all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God who said: *Be holy!* (i.e., Leviticus 11:45) *Be perfect!*

(Matthew 5:48) *or else* . . . isn't threatening, but is once again, promising to give that holiness and perfection He requires and demands. And along with that, this gift and promise too: eternal life.

And so not only was the famine and drought of God's Word over, but God was lavishly and abundantly pouring out *life*. Because not just a prophet, but ***the kingdom of heaven is at hand***. *Is at hand* - is here and now. *Is at hand* - within reach. Because now, not just the words of Amos' prophecy were fulfilled, but the words of Isaiah's as well, that we heard today: ***the shoot from the stump of Jesse*** had come.

Jesse was King David's father. At the time of King David, Israel's kingdom was grand, powerful, and glorious. If it were a tree, it was one unlike any other. The awe and desire of every other. But it didn't last. The tree rotted from the inside out. Idolatry took over the hearts and lives of the people - kings, prophets, priests, and people. And so God cut it down. Reduced it to a stump. But with this promise: that someday, it would grow again. That a shoot would appear and this tree once again bear good fruit. And so the shoot that would come from the stump would be a descendant of Jesse and David. *A son of David*.

And now it had come. He had come. The shoot had appeared in Bethlehem. He grew up in Nazareth. And now ***the kingdom of heaven is at hand*** - the shoot was now going to establish a kingdom even greater than David's. God's Word is not only being proclaimed, it is *happening*.

So you can't blame the people for being excited! Not even John's wild appearance could stop them. And they willingly and joyfully confessed their sins. They wanted the gift: of forgiveness, holiness, perfection, life. The kingdom of heaven.

Even the Pharisees and Sadducees came. They reluctantly *slithered* out of their den in Jerusalem and came to the Jordan. But John's message for them was a bit different. For the Word of God not only provided the gift of repentance and the promise of forgiveness, but also swings the axe at every false god, to chop down every idol, and destroy every false hope. And so the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came out to be baptized *but not to repent*, needed to be warned. So John told them: The axe that cut down David's tree is at your rotten roots as well. For your hope in your own goodness is a false hope that produces rotten fruit. Your trust on being a physically descended child of Abraham is an idol. And when you believe in your own lineage and works to save you, then you are your own false god. And ***every tree . . . that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire***.

But John is just the messenger. The prophet who broke the famine and the drought. The one coming after him, the one whose way he is preparing, the one ***who is coming after [him and] mightier than [he], whose sandals [he] am not worthy to carry***, Jesus - He is the one who will do it. Who will do both those things. He will gather His own in the

forgiveness of their sins, those who believe in and rely on Him. But those who do not, the chaff, *he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

And that is the Word still going out today, going out here, today. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* Repent, for this is the way to prepare for the coming king. Repent, for what are you relying on? Where are you looking for happiness? When you look at your life, what fruit do you see? Is it good fruit or rotten fruit, or a bit of both?

Are you relying on yourself and the good that you are able to do, the improvement you are able to achieve, your own change and dedication, like the Pharisees and Sadducees?

And where are you looking for happiness? Are you, too, listening to the voice of false gods, saying that happiness is here or there, in this sale, that person, or the fulfillment of your dreams?

And what about the fruit in your life? Have your deeds been always filled with love, your words always kind and helpful, your thoughts always for the good of others, and your desires always holy and pure? Or is there rottenness in you as well?

I know how I answer those questions. The same as you.

And so the call goes out today just as at the Jordan: to repent. But not just to repent, but to *receive*. To receive the gift of repentance and the promise of forgiveness. To return to the Jordan, to return to your baptism, and so **not return the gift you've been given, but return to the gift you've been given.** The gift with the promise of forgiveness and life. The gift of Jesus, who ascended the tree of the cross for you, that the axe of justice chop Him down instead of you, but then the shoot begin to grow again in His resurrection. The shoot now growing in you as your drought is broken with the waters of baptism, your famine is satisfied with the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and a child of Abraham by faith is raised from a hard and stony heart. These gifts, for you.

And for all people. The day is coming when the wheat and the chaff will be separated, but that day is not yet. Now, the Word of God goes forth. Now the Word of the Lord is proclaimed. That just as the perfect Son of God became chaff for us on the cross, we who are born chaff might become wheat - sons of God with His new and resurrected life. No matter who you are or what you have done. As St. Paul said today: it is for Jews and Gentiles alike. This gift is for all people. *The God of hope* wants to *fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.* By the power of the Holy Spirit you find your hope in Him, not in the things of this world. You find your confidence in Him, not in what you are able to achieve or in how you can improve your life. That you find it all in Him.

So while the message of repentance isn't a popular one in our world today, perhaps that is

a sign that it is needed now more than ever. Change is seen as good as long as it is the change I want. **But maybe the change you don't want is exactly the change you need.** And while there may not be any parking spaces at the mall this time of year, there is plenty of parking here. And a gift that costs you nothing and will never run out. The messenger doesn't look quite like John, and *I* am very grateful that his diet isn't the same - but the Word is the same. And the promise is the same.

For ***the kingdom of heaven is at hand*** here. *Is at hand* - is here and now. *Is at hand* - within reach. Reaching out to you with a handful of water that isn't just water, but a washing away of sin. Reaching out to your ears with words that aren't just words, but words that say: I forgive you. And you are. And reaching out with bread and wine that aren't just bread and wine, but the Body and Blood of the King, of the Immanuel, the God with you.

And so our prayer is answered. The prayer sung at the beginning of the service again this morning: *O Come, O Come, Immanuel* (LSB #357). He has. He is. And He will again. That when that day of winnowing comes, when He comes again, you be as excited as the crowds at the Jordan that day. Actually, even more. For you know the judgment. The gift is already yours. And with it, more than happiness - but joy. No axe or fire for you, only life. Isaiah's Paradise restored. By the shoot from the stump. Life from the dead. ***And a little child shall lead them***, Isaiah said. A Christ child.

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.