

Sermon for December 4, 2016 – Advent 2

Matthew 3:2 (EHV)

Theme: **Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!**

- 1) *Understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is.*
- 2) *Understand how repentance prepares you for it.*

²*“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!”*

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.” This simple sentence not only summarizes John the Baptist’s preaching, but also Jesus’ message during his earthly ministryⁱ and what the apostles proclaimed after Pentecost.ⁱⁱ The sentence has been the heart and core of the Church’s preaching throughout the ages, and will continue to be her exhortation until Christ comes again on the last day.

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.” Do you understand what these words mean? What exactly is “the kingdom of heaven” and how is it near? What does it mean to repent and why is it so important? Let us answer these questions under the theme: **Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!** 1) *Understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is.* 2) *Understand how repentance prepares you for it.*

Part One: *Understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is.*

I don’t know about you, but every time I hear the word “kingdom,” I immediately think of a medieval castle in some European country ruled by a king. Is this what the LORD wants us to think about when we hear John the Baptist proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is near? Not exactly.

You see, even though the original Greek word translated as “kingdom” in our text can refer to a geographical place, it also refers to a king’s ruling activity: his reign, so to speak. Therefore, whenever you see the phrase “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” in the New Testament, you should think about God’s ruling activity over his people.

The LORD created Adam and Eve perfect and holy. Before the fall into sin, they were members of God’s “kingdom,” who willingly submitted to God’s reign by obeying his one command: Don’t eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the Garden. Sadly, when Satan suggested to Adam and Eve that God was holding out on them - they ate the forbidden fruit. This was an act of unbelief and rebellion against the LORD’s gracious reign. This act separated both them and their offspring from God because every child after them would inherit the sinful nature with which they rebelled against the LORD.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, the Scriptures say. This means that we too have inherited the sinful nature with which Adam and Eve rebelled against the LORD. We were born outside of God's Kingdom - enslaved to sin and the devil. Like Adam and Eve, we pursue our own will instead of the LORD's. This makes us God's enemies. And what do earthly kings do with rebellious enemies? They put them to death! And so we too lived under the threat of God's eternal punishment.

But the LORD did not want us lost. For some reason that human reason will never be able to comprehend, the LORD pitied us to such a degree, that he took it upon himself to restore our broken relationship with him by sending his divine Son into the world to become human - just like us. As true God and true man, Jesus would live the life of perfect obedience to God's law that we all failed to live. He would take our sins upon himself in order to suffer the just punishment we deserved. By doing these things, Jesus would reconcile us to God so that we might once again be considered citizens of his heavenly kingdom – living at peace with him under his gracious rule.

So, when John the Baptist proclaimed: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,*" he was telling his listeners that the promised Messiah would soon restore their fallen relationship with God. The promised Christ was near - ready to forgive all sin and to rule in the hearts of all who receive him in faith - granting them the wonderful, free gifts of forgiveness, eternal life and salvation.

Jesus, the almighty king of heaven and earth, was already living in the land when John the Baptist proclaimed the nearness of his kingdom. But what about today? Is Christ near us today – ready to rule in our hearts?

Yes, he most certainly is! Where is he, then? He is wherever his Word and Sacraments are preached and administered in all truth and purity. Through these wonderful means of grace the Holy Spirit washes us clean from all sin by connecting us to Christ and the sacrifice he made for our sins on the cross. Through these wonderful means of grace, the Holy Spirit both creates and strengthens our faith in Christ so that we might live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in all righteousness, innocence and blessedness – both now and forever in heaven.

Part Two: *Understand how repentance prepares you for it.*

Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near! Now that we know what the kingdom of heaven is, let us learn what repentance is and why it's important.

The Augsburg confession says: ³ *Now, strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts.* ⁴ *One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin.* ⁵ *The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel [Romans 10:17] or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror.* ⁶ *Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance [Galatians 5:22–23].*

The Greek word translated as repent literally means "to change your mind." The idea is that those who once loved sin and hated God are changed to hating sin and loving God. But what could possibly bring about such a 180 degree change in a person's heart? Only the Holy Spirit working through the Word!

You see, we sinful human beings are born with a corrupt spirit. We like to think that we know what's best for us, and that we are generally good people, who can earn our own way to heaven; but nothing could be further from the truth.

The Bible reveals that we are totally corrupt: that every inclination of the thoughts of our hearts is only evil.ⁱⁱⁱ Now I know that nobody likes to think that about himself, but that is the truth. And the more time we spend in God's holy law – meditating on his commandments – the more we see this truth. God demands that we love and yet how often don't we hate? God demands that we build others up and yet how often don't we tear them down? God demands that we help others, and yet how often don't we take advantage of them? God demands that we love him above all else, and yet how often don't we refuse to listen to him – putting other people and things ahead of him. This list can go on and on!

The more we honestly meditate on God's Law, the more we have to acknowledge that outside of Christ, we are utterly corrupt and helplessly lost to selfishness and sin.

But there is good news. Jesus came to save us from our corruption. Through his sacrifice on the cross he paid for our sins in full. Through his resurrection he shows that God has accepted his payment. Through faith in him we not only receive his forgiveness, but the Holy Spirit also creates a new man inside of us: one that wants to please and honor the LORD – not out of fear of punishment, but out of love for the one who suffered and died in order to save us.

Repent, therefore, because the kingdom of heaven is near! Understand from God's Word how selfishly pursuing sin will only lead to your destruction! See also how God wants to rescue you from that destruction: how he paid for your sins in full and is willing to forgive you. Repent, therefore, by confessing your sins to God with genuine remorse. That's the first part of repentance. The second part is just as important: trust that God has forgiven your sins for Christ's sake. The LORD has restored your relationship with him so that he might rule over your heart by means of the Gospel.

Now that we know what repentance is, why is it important? Because without repentance there can be no forgiveness. Why is that? Because if we refuse to repent, we show ourselves to be the rebels Adam and Eve became when they fell into sin – distrusting of God and unwilling to submit to his rule over our hearts. By refusing to repent we in effect tell God that we don't care about him, his will, or anything he did to save us. We don't want him as our God because we love our sins more than him.

But when we repent – confessing our sins with genuine remorse and trusting in Christ's power and mercy to forgive – then He comes into our hearts, washes us clean and reigns in us by the power of his Word. And we are changed. How so? Because a new king rules over our heart: Jesus Christ himself. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he awakens new desires and attitudes inside of us. We no longer want to live for ourselves, but for him who saved us. We no longer want to take advantage of our fellow man, but help him any way we can – reflecting the same love towards him that Christ had for us. Instead of living in fear and hostility, we live in hope and love – trusting that God will keep his promise to deliver us.

Now this is not to say that we won't still struggle with selfish, sinful thoughts and desires. Because of the sinful nature that lives inside of us, we will struggle with these things until the day we die. But, compelled by the Spirit working through his Word, we can always turn to Christ in repentance – trusting that He will answer our prayers to both forgive us and rule in our hearts by the power of His Gospel.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: now that you know what the Kingdom of God is and how repentance prepares you for it, heed John the Baptist's call to repent – knowing that the kingdom of God is near. Live in a constant state of turning away from sin and to Christ in faith and love. Then Christ will rule in your heart – safely delivering you from all your enemies until he brings you home to himself in heaven. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Matthew 4:17

ⁱⁱ Cf. Acts 26:20

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Genesis 8:21