

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ who await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Over the years I've lived in Tucson, there have always been public preachers and "prophets" around. Students have often shared stories of how, on mall in the middle of the U of A campus, some of those preachers would scream and shout and belittle the students who cross their paths. Normally they are made fun of and messed with by the students, but rarely taken seriously. The most recent of them, "Brother Dean," certainly was known by some of you students, but his arrest earlier this semester seems to have resulted in a decline in "mall preachers."

Would it surprise you to know that I once had the unique experience of meeting the "prophet" Elijah on the side entrance of the church here? He could actually repeat many Bible passages, but this homeless man soon showed by his language and attitude that he was no "prophet"—and he certainly wasn't Elijah!

Typically, people don't pay much attention to these "prophets" today—and that's usually the best approach! So it may make us wonder what we would have thought about John the Baptist, especially as we hear about him living out in the desert, wearing scratchy clothes and living off the land, eating honey out of honeycombs in the clefts of the rocks along with the not-quite-as-popular locusts.

It may be disappointing to hear what wandering preachers and supposed "prophets" today are spouting, and it may disappoint you to learn that John the Baptist wasn't THAT exotic--those were just the clothes and food of people who didn't have much. But what is not disappointing in the least is to hear what the prophet John *was* preaching and *is still* preaching through the words of Scripture. You and I will be spiritually blessed if we will...

PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROPHET! as he tells us

- 1. "The Kingdom of Heaven is Near!"**
- 2. "Repent!"**
- 3. "Produce Fruit!"**

Just as Jesus was about to begin his public ministry, John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the hearts and minds of people so that they could see that Jesus was the long-promised Savior and put their faith in him. About 700 years prior, the prophet Isaiah had spoken of John's work: **"A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"**

And so as God prepared for the world to meet his Son, he sent John out into the Desert of Judea...and the people flocked to him! Just like we're used to going out to hear a concert or take in a play or watch a sporting event, these people went to hear this engaging prophet. But he wasn't in a concert hall, a stadium or even a temple; he was out in terrain that was as rough and rugged as his clothing AND at least a portion of his message.

The reason for him to be preaching at all was because THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN WAS NEAR. The Kingdom of Heaven is the action of God ruling in hearts. It is the entire process by which God saves sinners. And the way that happened was through the sending of his Son to live a whole life of perfection and to himself on the cross as a payment for the world's sin and then to defeat death by rising from it. This plan to bring forgiveness to a world full of sinners and swing open the gates to heaven for them was about to unfold. The promised Messiah was about to enter the world stage and do all those things required by his Holy Father and necessary for any person to have the assurance of eternal life. It didn't get any bigger than this! People needed to be alerted to this! God's plan was to use his prophet John. And the people came to hear him.

All kinds of people from all over the area went out into the wilderness to hear John—people from the big city of Jerusalem, from the outlying areas and from all along the Jordan River, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Included among those people were, in particular, some Pharisees and Sadducees. What they were doing together is a bit of a puzzle. While we might hear those names and just think, *"Oh, representatives of different religious groups,"* you have to know they had little in common.

Pharisees were the super-religious lay people. The ones who were self-righteous and truly believed that they were better than other people because of their strict adherence to God's law...and a whole lot of other religious laws that didn't come from God's Word.

The Sadducees' main problem is best summarized by saying that they were entirely focused on life in this world. For instance, they *did not* believe in the resurrection and *did* believe that rewards for righteous living were found only in this life then. So for them it was all about the here and now, living life to the fullest, because this world is all there is. They were wealthy, upper class and many priests were Sadducees.

One important thing the Pharisees and Sadducees did have in common was that they rejected John's preaching and therefore would later violently oppose Jesus as well. These people seemed respectable and religious but were actually opposed to God.

So John was preaching to a lot of everyday kind of people from all over and to these two distinct groups who came to check him out. His message was clear—*"The Kingdom of Heaven is Near...so Repent!"* All were sinful. All needed the Savior who was about to be revealed. All needed to repent.

It would be good to refresh our memories about repentance. Repent means to change your heart, to change your mind, to change the way you think about something. This necessarily leads to a determination to change your behavior. Repentance is recognizing that something is wrong in my life (it angers God) and wanting to change that because of a desire to please God. And this is not just the one or two major sinful challenges we might struggle with, it's everything—everything I do that's wrong. I hate all of that sin just like God hates it. I want to get it out of my life just like God wants me to get it out of my life. Repentance IS preparation

to receive Jesus and the forgiveness he brings for us. Most of you remember that this is not a one-time thing that a person does, but something a Christian does all the time. Martin Luther even said that the whole life of a Christian is to be one of repentance.

That's what the preparing prophet in the wilderness was preaching—**“Repent!”** Some of the people listened to John. John's preaching of the law worked on their hearts and their guilty consciences told them John was right, so they wanted to know more about this One who would come after John, who would be **more powerful than him, whose sandals he was not fit to carry**. The One who would **baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire**. They listened to the prophet and they repented and they were baptized by John in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. Theirs were the eyes that would see Jesus as the promised Savior.

And then there were the other guys. The odd pairing of Pharisees and Sadducees who rejected John and his message. The Pharisees, who knew that there were a lot of people who needed to repent—like the rabble gathered around this tattered teacher—but they didn't need to, not with their amazingly glorious lives! And the Sadducees who didn't see a need to repent of anything they were doing and didn't believe of any life after death or accountability to God once they died. “Repent” was still John's message to them. But he had more to say to them.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. 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. “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. 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.”

John wouldn't even baptize them! But he did give them a law/gospel sermon! The prophet was staring down the religious elite and insisting that they look inward, to see their sin and repent of it. And no weakly mumbled, *“I'm sorry”* to God would do! PRODUCE FRUIT means to show in your life that the change in your heart has actually taken place! The life of the repentant person should look different than it did before repenting! But to people who didn't believe they needed to repent and to people who didn't believe they would face God after death and had no belief in a glorious heaven or a fiery hell, the words had no positive effect.

They were a brood of vipers. If you think of Satan, the snake in the Garden of Eden, you'll realize that this amounts to John calling these religious leaders “children of the devil.” They were relying on the fact that they came from the long line of God's chosen people going back to Abraham, but John told them that no one is saved by being born into the right family. If they personally did not repent and show the good fruits of faith in their lives, they would be cut down like the unproductive trees they were and would be cast into the fires of hell. This was the rough message the rugged prophet was obligated to preach.

And he preaches it to us today as well. Because honestly, we can sometimes act like the Pharisees did. We can be self-righteous, proud of our church work or clean living, and look down on people who don't seem to be on quite the same level as we are. We can be pretty proud of our generous offerings to the Lord and suspect that our giving has got to be better than so many others. If this is how we operate, it is the equivalent of rejecting the prophet's message of repentance and bearing fruit!

Like the Sadducees, we may reject certain parts of God's Word that we don't like so much and think that we're okay for doing that. Like them, we may be much more interested in and concerned with our day-to-day lives than in our spiritual lives and the work of God's church. If we are so worldly-minded and it shows in our weak giving and our lack of service to God and others or interest in regular worship, then we're kind of saying that we aren't that interested in the Kingdom of Heaven.

You can see that we really need to PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROPHET too! You and I need to be reminded that THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR! Sitting where we are in history, we know that Jesus has already come into the world, but he has also promised to come again and he too tells us to be ready for that day. That day is nearer every morning we wake up!

We too need to pay attention when he tells us to "REPENT!" A change of heart is necessary because we are attached to our sinful ways and God wants us to abandon those. Repentance is a daily need for us because daily we sin. "PRODUCE FRUIT!" the prophet calls to us too. God is looking for lives that are changed, lives that are a constant expression of love and devotion to him. It can be so easy to listen here in church and even nod our heads in agreement with the Word of God we hear, but then leave and find that it has no effect on our lives. We need to PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROPHET.

But *why* would we listen? What would motivate us to watch for the Kingdom of Heaven? What would move us to repent? What would compel us to produce fruits of faith in our lives? Jesus. Jesus is the reason for all of that. Jesus is the One John was preaching about and the One to whom he would point the people and declare, "**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" Jesus is the One who was **more powerful than John, whose sandals John was not fit to carry**. The One who would **baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire**. Like many of the people who listened to the wilderness prophet, we too repent and find forgiveness for our sins. We see Jesus as the promised Savior who lived and died and rose to give us hope as we live in this world and life eternal when we leave it.

We look forward to the advent of the Kingdom of Heaven, that day we join our Savior. It's his love for us, his sacrifice for us, his promises to us that move us to PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROPHET and repent and produce fruits of repentance. We *want* to express our love and appreciation for Jesus in our lives and we realize that John the Baptist is worth listening to because he show us how we can do that until Jesus comes again to take us to be with him. May the Holy Spirit continue to work in our hearts so that we respond to the prophets' preaching in faith. Amen.