

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is Near”

I’m guessing this is true for many of you, and in fact, I know it is true for some of you because you have told me so. This time of year is busy. I’m not meaning to complain, because it’s not bad, it’s just busy. You may have noticed that for several weeks now the announcement section in the back of the worship folder has been full. We haven’t had to search for announcements to fill our space. We’ve had to find announcements that could be left out so that we’d have enough space for them all. There are extra worship services, music rehearsals, meetings, meals, and plenty more. Add to that all of the things that many of us are trying to get done at home, like decorating, shopping, and cleaning, and it’s easy to see why our schedules have been so busy.

One of the dangers of such a busy schedule is that we don’t always get to the things that are really important because we keep on working and spending time on those things that are urgent. For example, we hurry to finish cleaning the house because it’s urgent and company is going to arrive soon, but we neglect spending quality time with the family, which is very important, because it isn’t so urgent.

Today God’s Word encourages us to do something that is both urgent and important. It urges us to repent.

The messenger that shares God’s message with us is John, John the Baptist. He is certainly a unique figure on the pages of Scripture. To us much about him sounds strange: his place of employment in the wilderness, his clothing, his food. But at his time, John was much more than a curiosity. The people came out to him there in the wilderness. They recognized the simple clothing that many of God’s prophets had worn in the history of God’s people. They understood that the locusts and honey that he ate were acceptable food in the ceremonially clean diet of God’s people. And they knew that what was most important about John the Baptist was the message that he brought. The people went out to hear that message. And John said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”**

Repent. That’s a church word. There probably aren’t many other places that we run across it. And if I asked most people what it means to repent, they’d probably say that it means to be sorry for their sins. That’s close. Really the Greek word that’s translated repent talks about a total change of mind or change of heart. To repent is to realize our sinfulness and to turn away from it in sorrow and contrition, and to instead look to God for forgiveness.

And that’s important. John preached **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”** John was the one who had been promised through the prophet Isaiah, the voice that prepared the way for the Lord. In other words, John was getting the people ready for Jesus. And many responded. **People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.** These people recognized and confessed their sins and they looked to God’s prophet for forgiveness, and they were baptized by him. Those who repented understood that they needed someone else’s help. They confessed that they were unable to save themselves. They needed a Savior. Someone who doesn’t see his sins doesn’t realize that he needs a Savior. That person is not ready for Jesus.

And that’s why it is important for us also to repent. The call to repentance is even for lifelong active churchgoers. It is there for any of us who are tempted to think that since I go to church and I am generally good and nice, everything is fine. Everything is not fine. Repent.

Well, what does that mean for my life? It means that you actually and honestly look at your life. It means that you don’t just say, “sure, I’m a sinner” or “nobody’s perfect.” It means that you think about the times that you’ve been mean or unkind or uncaring. It means you recognize that you haven’t always done what God wants you to do, nor have you avoided the things that God calls you to avoid.

And to repent means to look to Jesus as your Savior from sin. John mentions him in a few ways in our text. First, he refers to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus came into the world to bring us into his kingdom, and ultimately to bring us to heaven. He is the Lord whose way John was working to prepare. God himself came down from heaven to earn heaven for us. And John calls Jesus **“one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.”** We are sinful and called to repent. Jesus is perfect and holy and gives his perfect righteousness to us. That’s why repentance is so important.

And here in our text is one more aspect of repentance, that is true repentance, for us to consider. John said to the hypocrites who had come to him, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** Repentance is more than words. We put repentance into action. Think of the sorts of fruit that are appropriate for repentance. If we are sorry when we hurt someone, we will want to do something to help that person. If we repent of a sinful relationship, we’ll want to end that relationship. If repent of misplaced priorities, we will want to work to align our actions with appropriate priorities. True repentance produces fruit in our lives.

And true repentance is not only important, it is also urgent. Once again, the urgency of John’s message was stressed most clearly in our text to the hypocritical Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came out to him. Listen again to what he said to them: **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said 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.’”**

To those who were running away from the truth, to those who had an appearance of being religious, but who didn’t have true repentance, John spoke strong words of warning and rebuke. They bore no fruit of repentance, and they would be cut down. Ultimately, John was warning them about God’s final judgment. At any time, they could be called to face that judgment. And apart from repentance, apart from trust in Jesus as their only Savior, they would be condemned to the fires of hell.

Our repentance is urgent, too. At any time Judgment Day could come. Our services last week spoke at length about the fact that none of us know when Jesus will return as judge. And whether or not the End of the World comes in our lifetimes, our own personal day of judgment could just as surely come at any time. In this world of sin and suffering, our safety and security are never guaranteed. Just a few minutes of watching the latest news or reading about our world today should be reminder enough that our lives could come to an end much sooner than any of us may expect.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. This is an urgent matter. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we need to come to church more, but it may invite us to consider whether we are giving church attendance the priority that it deserves. It does mean that when we hear God’s Word at church or at home or anywhere else that it ought to be given our sincere attention. We ought to apply it to our lives to uncover the sin that may otherwise lay hidden, and more importantly to see our Savior who takes that sin away.

Christmas is coming soon. I’m busy. You’re probably busy, too. We have important things to do. We have urgent things to do. Don’t neglect this matter that is both urgent and important: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

The Text: Matthew 3:1–12 (NIV84)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ “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. ¹² 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.”