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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
7 December 2025

Sermon on Matthew 3:1-12

Worship Theme:

**IMMINENT ARRIVAL OF THE JUDGE**

The judge is an important person. You stand when he enters the courtroom. What he says must be obeyed. If you are the one on trial, his determinations make a big difference in how your life will continue. You might be quite nervous if the judge is about to arrive. John invited people to turn their nervousness to repentance. The arrival of the Judge is imminent, and the kingdom of heaven is near! You are invited to hear John, repent, and believe the good news of the coming Savior.

Sermon Theme: “Repent and Believe”

How do you prepare for Jesus to come? At this time of year, maybe we think a lot about our normal Christmas traditions – putting up the tree, decorating the house, baking cookies, wrapping gifts, watching White Christmas, and blasting Mannheim Steamroller and Trans-Siberian Orchestra on repeat. But that's not exactly what John the Baptist had in mind when he quoted the Prophet Isaiah, who said: “*Prepare the way for the Lord.*” There's nothing inherently wrong with Christmas traditions, of course. But how do we actually properly prepare for Jesus to come? John's message was simple and clear: **Repent and Believe.**

But what does that mean and what does it look like? Matthew tells us, “*In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*” We often use this word “repent”, but what does it actually mean? It means to perceive or see something differently, or to have a change of heart and mind, completely turning around from one direction to the other. John's use of the word repent very strongly suggests that something was horribly wrong and needed to be fixed immediately.

What was it? Sin. That may sound so obvious to us, but by nature, it isn't obvious at all. Every human being is conceived and born into this world completely sinful and completely separated from the grace and goodness of God. But the problem is worsened when we realize we naturally don't care about that at all, and, even if we did care, we wouldn't be able to change it. The way we enter this world – completely sinful – is something we do not have the power to change in ourselves. It will continue to plague us for as long as we live on earth, regardless of whether we are Christians or not. We have a dark past that will not leave us alone, egged on by selfish thoughts and desires, fueled by the world around us and the influence of Satan. Yes, something is very horribly wrong indeed.

This is why John proclaimed the need for repentance – a change! A turning away from that life and turning toward something better. This is necessary because someone else is coming too, someone for whom the way must be prepared, someone who has complete authority to judge all people for time and eternity. His coming is imminent and his judgment is certain.

So John the Baptist came, preaching, “Prepare the way for the Lord.” The Lord is coming! And if he finds us in this wretched sinful state, there is nothing we can possibly say or do to make it better – he will come with the right to judge, and we will be appropriately condemned as our thoughts, words, and actions deserve. If we’re paying attention, that thought should make us terrified of his coming. This isn’t something we should celebrate; we should be shaking in our boots, scared to death that his arrival will come at any moment and we’ll be out of time.

For many people, this is not a hypothetical situation. For everyone who does not know Jesus and does not have faith in him, that is exactly what will happen when Jesus comes – a terrifying judgment and an eternal condemnation. This is what makes the message of repentance so critical and so urgently needed – Jesus really could arrive at any moment, and for everyone who is not prepared, it will not be good when he does.

Our natural thought is to try making excuses or give reasons why we should not be subjected to such judgment. That was what many of the religious people in John’s day did. Even religious leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees had a long list of reasons why God should look favorably on them in his judgment. But their reasons were so shallow and completely missed the main point, focusing on themselves instead of where their focus belonged. John even called them out on it – *“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.”* They were so focused on trying to do all the right things and trying to maintain the right image and identity that they failed to understand John’s message of repentance and faith. They thought they could make themselves prepared for God to come!

We can fall into that same trap today too, can’t we. Do we ever think we’re better Christian people just because we’re WELS? Have we become so focused on belonging to a WELS church that we think as long as our names are on the books, that should be good enough and we don’t actually have to go that often? Do our lives openly reflect repentance and change, or do they look completely identical to everyone else in society? If people can’t tell the difference between us and anyone else, it doesn’t matter what we call ourselves. John should also say to us, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! Out of these STONES God can raise up other WELS people!” **Repent! Repent.** When we cling too strongly to what we have made ourselves, **repent.** Turn. Change! But how? If we are stuck like this and can do nothing to bring about this change in ourselves, how will we survive the coming of the one for whom we are not prepared, the one who comes in judgment?

The answer to that is delightfully unexpected good news – we’re saved BY HIS COMING! It is true that the coming of the Messiah will mean condemnation for all who are separated from him and reject him, but it is also that very same coming which gives hope and peace to the human race at all. Because when he comes, he comes with the power to change and turn the hearts of people away from the kingdom of darkness and death and toward the kingdom of light and life.

In other words, the very repentance God seeks from people, God causes within people. Repentance can only come from a heart changed by God and is more something done TO us than it is something done BY us. It is nothing less than a miracle. We often think of the “confession of sins” definition of the word repentance, acknowledging that we have sinned against God, disobeyed him, and deserve only his wrath and punishment. But we would never even know we had sins to confess if God had not already worked within us to help us realize how greatly we have failed and how dearly we need a Savior. Which means our hearts have already been turned away from our past lives and the worthless things we clung to, and turned toward him and his Word. A change that significant and eternally effective can only be done by the Lord himself.

And when he has effected that change within us, we find another miracle: we believe. The one whom John calls “*more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry*” – THAT Lord sends his Holy Spirit to us and creates within us the faith required for citizenship in his kingdom. He helps us see past the lesser details of our lives and put aside the shameful parts of our past, turning away from them, knowing that when we do, we are turning toward something far more powerful and important, the only something that can truly save us.

So the amazing truth before us today is this: the very repentance and belief we need in order to be prepared for the coming of the Lord, the Lord himself provides for us when he comes. That makes his coming the most joyful thing we can possibly anticipate! Because we know that when he does, it will not be for our condemnation, but rather for our salvation. We are saved because of the Savior who comes. We hear the call to **repent**, knowing our Lord himself has changed us. We hear the call to **believe**, knowing our Lord himself has created faith within us. And therefore we know we are already rightly prepared for his coming.

So what does that mean for us? It means the season of Advent preparation is one of unparalleled joy and anticipation as we simultaneously prepare to celebrate again Jesus’ first coming and remain prepared to welcome him at his return again. The coming of Christ holds no fear for us – we are prepared and ready to welcome our Lord, because he himself has made us so. In the meantime, while we wait for him, we see the fruit of repentance naturally produced in our lives – confessing our sins and leaving our old way of life behind; prioritizing time with our Lord, his Word, and his people; and eagerly calling out in love to others who do not yet know him or who have strayed away from him. Only by faith in Jesus do we remain prepared for his coming. Only by faith in Jesus are we declared righteous and perfect in God’s sight. And so we thank and praise him for his first coming and his soon-to-be-fulfilled second coming! By his first, he brought repentance and faith to people by grace. At his second, he will graciously take home all who are prepared for him. This is very good news – thank you, Jesus! Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.