**Matthew 3:1-12 December 4, 2022**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, Matthew chapter 3 here re-reading these words. “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were coming out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them. ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we talked about last week, when it comes to this time of year we most times do the same things we have done in the past. Christmas is a great time for traditions, but sadly they all don’t get the same amount of time or effort. Think about it, if you add a tradition every year, then eventually there will just be too many to keep up with. The traditions that my wife and I had for Christmas changed when we had children. We added traditions and some we stopped doing. You can’t do it all. There’s only so much time in the month of December. Which can lead to a prioritizing and giving up of certain family or personal traditions for the Christmas season, or it can mean doing a tradition with your heart only halfway in it. Have you ever experienced that in your life? Doing something just so you can say, you did it? A tradition that is done every year, and if anyone asks, “Why do we do this” someone will respond “This is just what we do.” Going through the motions, but your heart isn’t really in it. We do those sorts of things all throughout the year and even with Christmas.

It’s just what you do. How often has our faith been seen that way. Church becomes just..what we do, whether we realize it or not. But when faced with the question of why we do it, why it’s important, or even why it’s essential to our lives, we don’t really have a great reason. I wouldn’t expect anyone to say that they go to Church because it’s always going to be a monumental and life changing experience every time they come here. So why do you do it? Why do you come here? Because it’s a Sunday tradition? A Sunday routine? Because it’s just what you and your family do? Or is it a response to the faith that exists in your heart, and a thanksgiving to God for what He has already so richly blessed you with in your life?

I bring this up because we see a “just what you do” mentality in our Gospel lesson, that John calls out immediately upon seeing the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Matthew does a brilliant job in showing the difference between the experience of the crowds, both Jew and Gentile, and what the Pharisees and Sadducees were seeking. John the Baptist was preparing the people for the coming Christ, which meant repentance, confession, and an understanding that Christ was coming soon. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” This led the people from Jerusalem, Judea, and all the region about the Jordan to come out to him, to hear his message, to receive forgiveness, and to be baptized. Matthew records that they came out to him and were baptized, but that with this baptism was also the confession of their sins. The Pharisees came just for the baptism. This baptism had grown in popularity if it made it from Jerusalem to the region all around the Jordan river. The Pharisees and Sadducees no doubt had to answer why they hadn’t received this baptism from others, and so they came out to make sure they remained involved in what was going on with the people. They came to see what the fuss was all about, seeking only the baptism, but not the forgiveness. They came because it was very simply what everyone was doing.

There used to be a time when going to Church was the culturally and socially acceptable thing for people to do. Those days have changed though in our modern society. Which begs the question, and again I will ask you to really reflect upon your own heart, and your own motivations, why do you come here? To relax? To let your mind wander and think of other things that you have to or should be doing? Because it’s good for the children in our midst to know what Church is and be exposed to it? To set a good example for them? To feel good about ourselves? To see our friends and our family, and enjoy the time of fellowship with them before and after the service? If these are your reasons, if any of those jumped out to you as to why you walk through those doors and come to this place, don’t worry. No one is coming for you to kick you out. Your membership won’t be removed, you won’t be excluded. But that’s not really the main focus of why we gather together here for worship.

The reason is what John says, the message that we need to hear every moment of every day because we live in a reality of sin from the moment we were conceived, and something that we especially must be reminded of and focused on as we go through the Advent season and are reminded of what the birth of Jesus Christ meant for this world. “In those days John the Baptist came.” What days were those? The bad days so to speak for God’s people. Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson says in his prophecy of a Savior that a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse. Jesse of course was the Father of David, the greatest King in the history of Israel. And this glorious and mighty Kingdom, the work of David, had been reduced to nothing, but a stump. The kingdom had been divided, conquered, and in many ways destroyed. There wasn’t much left but a stump, yet a shoot had come forth from it. A shoot that would have the Spirit of the Lord, and a Spirit of wisdom, and understanding, and counsel and might and knowledge and the very fear of the Lord within him. That’s who was coming. In a world of sadness and despair for God’s people the shoot of Jesse’s stump, the very Son of God was coming, and the people had to be prepared.

So the message is simple, and it’s why we come together in worship. The message must be heard now more than ever. It’s the message of Advent, and one that fits the candle that was lit, because that candle’s emphasis is preparation. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Repent. Your sins are the problem, a problem you can’t possibly take care of on your own, so come to God’s altar and repent. Don’t come to look good to others, don’t come to show off how pious or righteous you are, or for favors or reputation, because those things are all focused on yourself and building it up. Come and be brought low. Come and be humbled. Come to the place where you can’t hide what you’ve done. Come and be revealed for what you are, a sinner. And I’ve got good news for you, you will be in good company. Because everyone gathered here, is a sinner along with you. And we’ve come to repent. Repent of our selfishness, repent of our fears, repent of our pride, repent of our evil and sinful natures, of our evil and sinful deeds, of the times that we’ve had other gods, misused God’s name, and even despised the preaching of God’s Word. We come to repent. We come to be focused on the stump that this world and our lives has become, and that without Christ nothing matters because we would be headed for an eternity of punishment, darkness, and separation.

This isn’t just “something we do”. It’s not just a tradition that is done for tradition’s sake. It isn’t even something that should fall on the back burner or be done halfheartedly because there’s so many other important things to do in our lives. This is our time to receive from God, exactly what he has promised to give us. And that’s the gift of the Holy Spirit. That’s the baptism of the Holy Spirit that we were blessed to receive. That’s the joy, and comfort, and peace that God freely offers to us as we sit, relax, and receive. This is a place for sinners. If you seek your own glory here you won’t find it, because at no point in the service do we stop and praise ourselves, but the glory remains solely fixated on what God has done for us. And that’s worth studying, praying about, rejoicing and praising. Because God in His divine wisdom sent His only Son, the shoot of Jesse’s stump as Isaiah tells us, who does not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his hears hear, but he has come to give righteousness, to the poor. He has come to deal with the meek, and from his mouth he will destroy the wicked. Isaiah gives us this picture of the work of God’s own Son to show that Jesus ultimately came for the meek, the lowly and the weak, because no one has the power to destroy sin on their own.

He came in blessing, humility and love. He came in order to die the for sins of the whole world, as the true “Lamb of God” the sacrifice for sin. We gather together more than once during Advent because this message needs to be understood in our lives. We need time to make sense of what it meant that the very Son of God came into this world to die for us. To suffer for us. To give us eternal life through his death and resurrection.

So come. Repent. Receive. Relax. God’s love for you is never ending, no matter what you’ve done or what you’ve thought in the past. No matter if your faith was something that was essential to you or just something you did. God still loves you. Cares for you. Watches over and provides for you. And invites you to come and hear His Word, receive His gifts, and bask in his glory together with fellow sinners who have been redeemed.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.