**Matthew 3:1-12 December 8, 2019**

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 going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

You brood of vipers! That’s what I called you a year ago, as I took this pulpit for the first time. I didn’t know all of your names, and I will admit to you all I still don’t know all of them, but that’s what I called you. A brood of vipers. I told you that the wrath of God was coming upon the unrepentant, and sinful of this and every generation, and that you must, and I told it to you in the imperative command as it shows up here in Matthew 3 just as it does in Luke 3 last year, do Good Works! Not a suggestion, a command. The command of this particular section of Holy Scripture, the words of the forerunner of Jesus Christ, found here in the scriptures chosen for the Second Sunday of Advent. I didn’t know you, and yet I told you, “Repent!”

And now by the grace of God over this past year I have gotten to know you. I have seen how things work here at Trinity Lutheran Church in Onekama. I have been with some in the hospital, I have visited homes, prayed with loved ones, baptized some, married some, even buried some. So now, in my educated life as your pastor with a year of experience of knowing you and what makes you tick I come to you with this message from this text on this Sunday in the Church Year, “You brood of vipers! Repent! Do Good Works! The wrath of God is coming upon the unrepentant and sinful of this and every generation. Repent and produce fruit, for every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The message doesn’t change. No matter how well I know you, whether I am blessed to stay here another 10 years, or another 60 years, whether I tell this message to your children’s, children’s children. John the Baptist didn’t know the crowds all personally, he didn’t know all of their names, their backgrounds, their place of origin, their “story” so to speak, but he knew one universal truth of all people and that is that we are born into sin and that we are slaves of sin and that left in that state of sin we are headed for eternal fire and punishment. So we must repent. He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, he was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the one who would come before, he was the one who was tasked with making the rough places smooth and preparing the royal highway, and that’s not easy. And it isn’t accomplished by justifying why there is a rock in this spot, and with understanding why this part of the road goes in circles, and just accepting that the road is going to be bumpy and unprepared because that’s just the way it is. The road must be smoothed, the path must be prepared, the reasons are irrelevant, sin is sin and so as we all are sinners we all must repent.

And bear good fruit, which is the further application. Because to repent is to say you are sorry, to change your heart, to come to God in contrition and sorrow over your sin and seek forgiveness from a God of mercy, care, and love. It’s easy to say you are sorry when you know you will be forgiven! When you escape punishment by your repentance rather than face punishment for your wrongs. But repentance finds it’s true definition in the good fruit that is produced, because repentance without a further action, is no repentance at all. How can you say you are sorry for doing something if while you are repenting of that action, you are thinking of when you are going to do that wrong action again? How can your claim of faith be true if the evidence of faith is the fruit of good works and all you ever do is works that revolve around your own self gratification and happiness? Faith is shown in good works, the fruit of faith the evidence that the tree is alive is that it produces fruit, and the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Meaning that it’s cutting time. It doesn’t matter how busy the days are, how many days are left until Christmas, even the fact that we are jumping into the Advent pool because we lost last week to snow and ice. There’s no time for getting used to the water, it’s time to swim, we’ve got 2 Sundays left, Christmas is coming, and more than just a recognition of the first coming of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, we look to the second coming of Jesus Christ which could happen at any time. There isn’t time to wait, this is repentance time, this is faith strengthening time, because the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire.

And just because you know someone doesn’t mean the truth changes, or the Word changes, or the message is modified. That’s the lesson of John the Baptist, whose father Zechariah was a priest, and was one who knew the Pharisees and Sadducees personally. Meaning that John the Baptist would have every excuse to take it easy on these men who come to see what all the fuss is about and receive a baptism as well. But instead of John letting them off the hook, or giving them preferential treatment because he knows them, he goes the opposite direction. Because he knows them further and their true intentions of coming, he reserves the harshest of criticisms for them, calling them sons of sin, a brood of vipers, and giving them the same message. “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” And before they can use their Abraham lineage as an excuse for why they would be deserving of forgiveness he cuts them off and points to God’s ability to raise up sons and daughters from lifeless stones, which is what we are as His children, adopted into His family, from a Gentile lineage.

And the same message for the Jew is the same message for the Gentile. Repent. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And know you are forgiven. Know that the king who comes doesn’t seek your end but the beginning of your true life with him, because life as a dead tree is depressing, and without purpose, and in that life you accomplish nothing but simply wait to be burned. But life as a new creation in Christ is one where fruit effortlessly is produced and harvested in the form of what you do because of all that Christ has done for you. And you don’t have to worry about how much fruit, or what kind of fruit, or checking off boxes of different things that you have to do and make sure you are at the perfect quota like this is some kind of business, that is an earthly way of seeing any kind of production and that’s not what God has called for you to do in your life of thanksgiving to him. Repent and know you are forgiven, bear fruit and know that it is God who works in you to do any good thing. That’s the message of John the Baptist, don’t try to justify the rock in the road, don’t make excuses for the fact that the path wasn’t prepared, own up to your wrongs, your past, your sin, and be forgiven. Receive from him who comes to make you ready to receive even more!

This promise is for you, and your children’s children’s children. And your neighbor, and co workers, and that acquaintance that you see multiple times throughout the week, and it’s especially, 100% for your family and those you know the best. The ones that you are tempted to take their side in any circumstance because of how close you are, but it can’t be that way with God’s Word. God’s Word speaks truth to sin, and we all have sinned and are covered in it. Rather than try to overlook it, cover it, justify it, modify the message to accommodate it in our lives or say that God is wrong in judging it for what it is, let’s put all of that aside and simply hear the words of the one who comes to prepare our hearts in this glorious season of the Church Year. Repent. Be forgiven. Bear good fruit.

The message stays the same. God stays the same. Our unchanging God whose love for us never wavers and never stops. The preparations for Christmas is rooted in tradition, we all have family traditions, those things that make this time of year special and don’t change. It woudn’t be Christmas if we didn’t eat that specific kind of cookie, if we didn’t hear that song, sing that hymn, have a tree up, put up that ornament, or that nativity set, or go to that event. Sameness in a world that is constantly changing is comfort and peace of knowing that while everything else may change, this stays the same. Well, the call to repentance is the same, and the love of God is the same. And we will sing the well known songs in this season of preparation, and you will hear the texts of Scripture that speak about Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. But don’t think that because it’s the same message that it has lost it’s meaning. See God’s continued care during this special season of preparation and prepare your hearts not just for the celebration of Jesus’ birth, but for his glorious return.

Amen.

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

Amen.