

2013\_12\_08 Advent 2 | Sermon  
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
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### **Christ's Kingdom is an Event which Creates a Reaction**

based on the Gospel of the day

Matthew 3:1-12

INI

**Let us PRAY: O Lord, You are victorious in Your humble death and glorious resurrection; let Your kingdom come, we pray, with grace and forgiveness, that we might be granted to stand in Your eternal presence. Amen.**

*Matthew 3:1–2* In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

To all who look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, the grace of God which brings salvation be yours, dear fellow redeemed, (Titus 2:11-13)

You need to repent.

Ok? Do I know you?

I don't think you get it. You see, you need to repent. Don't you know what is coming? You need to get your life straightened out. The Lord is coming – it says He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire! If you don't repent, you will go to hell! ...

A conversation like this is likely to get a reaction. But of what sort?

... Defensiveness?

– But what about you!

... Despair?

– You're right, I do need to repent. But I my sins are too many, too great, and what if I sin again?

... Determination?

– Ok, you're right. I don't want to end up like those other sinners. I will do it. I'm ready to get more religious.

Whichever reaction, this conversation is coming up short. It is missing something. It is missing the most essential element of John's preaching.

Yes, we need to repent. But the problem is we don't. The problem is, we can't. What we really need to do is repent of this whole conversation. This conversation has become all about what you need to do. It is missing the most essential element of John's preaching. Today we seek to find a definition of repentance.

## 1. What Repentance Is NOT.

We tend to think repentance is something someone we need to do, something I can do, something someone else must do. Its a command isn't it? "Repent!"

And so we try to initiate it. We have a conversation with Jim. You see, our friend Jim has some problems. He doesn't go to church. He been divorced twice. He has a problem with his weight. And he has a problem with drinking. Now Jim is the sort of person that really needs to repent, right? His life is a mess. He has hit rock bottom. So what do I do? What do I say? I keep trying to tell him, "you need to repent!" In fact, he admits I'm right; he admits that he has sinned. But he's afraid. He's afraid God won't forgive him; he's afraid his sins are too many; he's afraid he will slip up again. So what do I say, "You know Jim, all you need to do is to repent and stop making excuses. You need to get your act cleaned up. You need to become a Christian. You need to start going to church – an orthodox church, of course." But what am I saying? Am I not saying, "Jim, you really need to look more like me if you want to be saved"?

They come out saying, "We have Abraham as our father." We are the center of religious life. We are the definition of piety. And who does this baptizer think he is, offering forgiveness for free? ...to someone like Jim?"

Do not think to say such things.

Do not think to say, "At least I'm not as bad as Jim!"

Do not think to say, "At least I have repented."

Do not think to say, "At least I go to church."

Do not think to say, "At least I'm Lutheran."

Do not think to say, "At least I am orthodox."

The axe is already laid to the root, and its poised to take us out at the heels. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down. I've stood tall; I've assumed my own Christian good looks will save me. And the axe is being swung.

Repentance is not something I need to do, can do, or can get someone else to do. That is to say, repentance is not something I can initiate. Not by what I do or by what I tell someone else to do. Repentance is not defined by how I look, who I am, what church I

belong to, how many Sunday services I've been to, and how I have cleverly hidden away my sins my sins in secret. For, as Paul writes, "you are inexcusable O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge, practice the same things" (Romans 2:1). This conversation is missing something.

## 2. What Repentance IS

Repentance is not an action, it is a reaction. Yes, "Repent" is a command. But that is not all there is to it. There is more. John did not just preach: "You need to repent." There was, in fact, an event within his proclamation that initiated it all; a hidden force compelling his words; something at work changing hearts – even within someone like Jim, even within someone like you.

*Matthew 3:1–2 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"*

Notice the basis for John's call to repent. "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Whatever that means. Whatever this phrase "the kingdom of heaven" might mean, it must be important – something not to be left out. In fact, it really expresses everything there is to know about repentance. In this simple phrase, John's hearers were compelled; they grasped some grave need for salvation now and some common hope for where to find it. This phrase caused multitudes of people to travel a days journey or more, to gather in the desert, and see to this strange sight – a nomad clothed in camel's hair, girded with a leather belt, quoting the some old writings of a prophet.

Repentance is a reaction to the coming of Christ's kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is an event which creates a reaction. It creates a reaction, in part, because of how strange it is. It is strange because it is so different than the kingdoms we are used to. God's heavenly power is so distinct and foreign compared to earthly authority. God's rule is not found in the midst of the religious authorities of Israel; nor is it seen in the comforts of earthly fame and power. It is found out in the desert, where a man is clothed in camel hair rather than fine linen. ...a strange voice in the desert – just as Isaiah prophesied.

This alerts us to the strange manner in which our King comes. Think about what it means for the Son of God to take on human flesh, to be constrained to our human limitations and to feel our human pain. Think about what it means for God to be among us, to perform miracles, to cast our spirits, to raise dead Lazarus! Think about

what it means for the Son of God to stand trial before an earthly judge and declare to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18).

The kingdom of God is an event of God’s reign, where God exercises heavenly authority on earth. It meets its goal and destiny in the death and resurrection of God’s Son. There in the death of Christ our King, God was exercising His rule over sin and death itself. The kingdom of heaven is a violent intrusion of something strange into our world. It is the Creator enter into His creation and even into our sins; the only-begotten of God “did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for you” (Mt 20). “God made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5). And God would prove this true power of His reign by exercising His power over death. The event of Christ’s body rising from the tomb was an event where Christ’s kingdom was coming and all our sins were forgiven.

The kingdom of heaven is the strange event where God comes from heaven to earth to enact His reign upon us. So repentance is a reaction to the event in which God comes from heaven to earth to enact His reign upon us.

So, the kingdom of heaven is at hand – when Christ is conceived; when He performs a miracle; when He suffers for us; when He rises from death and ascends to His throne in heaven; and when He comes to reign in our hearts.

So Paul writes in Romans, *Romans 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

This event of the Holy Spirit is very strange event. And we are right to think of the kingdom of heaven as an event. The kingdom of God is never stagnant or complacent. It is not a place or an object. It is happening; it is an activity; it is something which creates a reaction.

As Luther puts it in his explanation to the 2nd petition: *God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and live a godly life here in time and hereafter in eternity (Luther’s Small Catechism, Second Petition).* There is a hidden force in John’s proclamation; a driving conviction that only God’s Holy Spirit can create: “Repent, for the event of heaven has come; God has entered into our world; and is changing our lives.”

It is in such a proclamation that God has chosen to send His Spirit. When we hear John say: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” – we should think, “God is doing

something; God is coming from heaven to earth to enact His reign.” This is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. By revealing Christ, He makes us readily aware of our sins; the deepest and darkest sins we have hidden away are suddenly exposed before the coming of Christ. We flee the wrath to come and suddenly consider the grave depth of love that would offer God’s own Son as the payment. It is all His action.

If repentance had been something I need to do or something I can initiate, then John would need not call it the kingdom of heaven; it would simply be another in a long list of those who proclaim the kingdom of earth. This would not strike us as strange at all.

We are quite used to the way the kingdoms of this world function. Survival of the fittest. They all function on the basis of the law. “If you expect to escape punishment, then you must do – this and this and this and such and such...” It is all written in the letter of the law. And the conversation is all about your obedience, your survival, your strength. If you want someone’s favor, you need to earn it; and when you’ve earned it, it is yours to keep and no others. It is the glory you’ve earned. We’re used to this. There is nothing particularly strange about it.

But Christ’s kingdom, on the other hand, creates a reaction. It brings with it the strange idea of grace apart from any merit. So Jesus will liken it to an invitation. “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who arranged a marriage for his son. He sent out his servants to call those who were invited. When they made excuses, the king said: ‘go into the highways and byways,’ into the desert, into the strangest of places and invite those most unlikely to be seen at a king’s banquet.” (Matthew 22:1ff). That is to say, invite Jim. That is to say, invite those gathered here today.

Invite them to this strange event where simple water will wash them of all that is against them. Bring them from all around to this place of my kingdom where the invitation has no qualifications; where you do not come because of who you are, but because of what I say and what I’ve done. Prepare the way, for I am coming. I am not going to wait for them to come to me, but I am coming to them. I am coming to change them. I will prepare My own way; all things are ready. And I will raise up from these stone hardened hearts, a child of my own making. I will do it all. For I am Christ and I save by my propitiatory grace.

This event of His kingdom invitation is how the Holy Spirit creates a reaction. And we call such reaction: repentance; that is, a change of heart. Repentance is a reaction of faith created by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of God’s gracious invitation.

This reaction is more than a momentary decision or commitment. God does not visit this Creation, this heart for only a for a day then leave you to yourself the next. He does not even does not come only at Christmas. “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” He comes every day in which we ponder the coming of His kingdom; a kingdom of grace which never stops reigning. As Luther puts it in his 95 Theses: “When Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said in Matthew 3:2, Poenitentiam agite, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” Repentance is a reaction that is not just a part of one day, it is a part of every day for the Christian. Repentance is really no different than faith. It is to trust in our Lord for His forgiveness and live in His love. It is our baptismal identity. “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, He cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In those waters of the Jordan river and in these waters of this font, God is invading His Creation and establishing His throne in your heart.

God’s grace and Christ’s kingdom bring a strange reaction. A reaction where God’s child now bears works that agree with repentance: where a person gets help for an addiction; where a couple gets marriage counseling from the pastor; where a troubled heart reveals the painful truth that has been kept hidden; where a honest conscience returns what has been stolen; where an employee does her job well even when no one is watching; where a son speaks respectfully to his mother. Repentance is a baptismal reaction where a Christian bears fruit. And there are times when such an event results in you being cast out to the desert – far from the religious majority opinion; to a place where, frankly, we look and sound strange to others. These are all fruits of His creation, with nothing but the participation of faith on our part. And even such faith is a product of the Spirit. These are the strange and wonderful events of Christ’s reign. All we can do is react to the gracious invitation which has made these things possible. Repentance is a reaction which is expressed in the believer’s whole life of humble faith and service toward the God who has redeemed him or her.

Today we define repentance; and we find it as full as the Scriptures are deep.

- 1) Repentance is a reaction to the coming of Christ’s kingdom.
- 2) It is a reaction to the strange event where God comes from heaven to earth to enact His reign upon us.
- 3) It is a reaction of faith created by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of God’s gracious invitation.
- 4) And it is a reaction which is expressed in the believer’s whole life of humble faith and service toward the God who has redeemed him or her.

Don’t you get it? Christ’s kingdom is at hand!

Ok. I get it. We need to repent. The problem is we don't. The problem is, we can't. But the good news is, the coming of Christ's kingdom does it all for us.

Just let Christ do the work. The strange event of God has come. The invitation is extended. And the Holy Spirit is creating the reaction. Repent, indeed! Because the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

**Christ's kingdom is an event which creates a reaction – and we call that reaction: repentance.** Amen.