

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT DECEMBER 11, 2005

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

GET READY! CHANGE! Matthew 3:1-6

During the month of December there is a lot of hustle and bustle as people get ready. We see it in our society and in the church. You go to stores and malls and the places are jam packed with people. Many are spending hundreds and even thousands of dollars to buy just the right gift for everyone on their list. Then there are those who are buying the ingredients to make those special cookies and other dishes that signify Christmas to their family. In the church we see children practicing for their Christmas service – learning those special recitations and songs that they will sing next Sunday or on Christmas Eve. The choirs have put in much time to prepare for the service today. All this has become part of our getting ready for Christmas.

Two thousand years ago there was a preacher in the desert of Judea that was calling people to get ready because the kingdom of heaven was near. That preacher was John the Baptizer. His appearance may seem a bit strange to us today. He was wearing clothes made from camel hairs and a leather belt around his waist. But this was not strange to the people of his day. For this was the same type of clothes that the prophet Elijah wore when he preached in Israel calling people to repentance. His food may seem strange to us. But John was poor and that food was readily available to him in the desert – locusts and wild honey. In fact, the law of Moses permitted people to eat grasshoppers and locusts. (cf. Leviticus 11:20-23) While out in the desert of Judea we are told that people came to where John was from Jerusalem, Judea and all the regions surrounding the Jordan River. They came and were baptized by John, confessing their sins. John's message was **GET READY! CHANGE!**

THE DIFFICULTY IN CHANGING

Do you like to change? Probably not. Most of us have difficulty in dealing with change. We would like all things to remain as they always have been. But the truth is nothing remains the same. You and I are not the same as we were ten or twenty years ago. We have changed. The way we do things is not the same and it can't remain the same. Times have changed. Now this does not mean that the Word of God has changed. It hasn't. God's truth is constant and unchanging. However the manner in which we deliver that Word certainly has changed. We don't have many people like John the Baptist out in the desert preaching. But we still have followers of Jesus Christ proclaiming His Word through the medium of the internet, in church buildings over sound systems, on television and the radio. The medium that we are using to proclaim the Word may have changed since the days of John the Baptist, but the Word of Truth is still being proclaimed.

The message is still the same – Repent. What does that mean? It means to change your thinking. Change your thinking about yourself, about your God and about the way you are living.

It is often difficult to change one's thinking about oneself. Don't most of us like to think that we are right and my way of viewing things is the only correct way and my way of doing things is the best and if only everyone did it my way, what a wonderful world this would be? But that is not what the Word of God reveals. When I read what God expects of me and then look at myself, I see a great gap. God says, "Love me with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37) and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39) Do I? I certainly don't. My tendency is to put my needs and my concerns before my God and before others.

How often don't you and I think we know it all and we aren't interested in learning something new about ourselves and about our God? We are content sometimes with knowing as little as possible. Because if I learn and discover more it will mean that I may have to change and correct what I have been thinking and doing. Or we may not like what we find out about ourselves.

We also need to change our thinking about our God. We live in a time when many seem to view God as a kindly old grandfather who just smiles and nods his head when we rebel and sin. God has been pictured for us as George Burns, a tottering old man smoking a cigar. God is a just God. He is a God who does not tolerate sin and will punish sin. We see that hatred against sin and sinners on the cross where he damned his only Son. Sin is serious and deadly. We also cannot just view God as a just and punishing Judge. God is also a loving and forgiving Father who forgives our sins and welcomes us with open arms when we return to him.

The other area where our thinking needs alterations and changes is with our lives. It is so easy to get trapped by some particular sin. Before you know it we use God's forgiveness as justification to continue to live a certain way or continue to do something even though we know it's wrong. We reason, "Well, God forgives." Here is where John the Baptist sounds, "Bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance." If you know something is wrong, then change. Don't continue to keep on doing it. When people asked John the Baptist what they should do, he said, "The man with two coats should share with the man who has none; and the one who has food should do the same. " John told tax collectors "Don't collect any more taxes than you are required to." (Luke 3:10-13) We would say to those today who are trapped in the sin of drunkenness and drug abuse, stop drinking and stop using. We would say to those who are sexually active outside of marriage, stop your fornicating. We would say to those who are addicted to gossiping and destroying other people's reputations by their words, keep your mouth shut and don't spread lies or the truth about others that ruins their reputation.

GOD BRINGS ABOUT CHANGES

Now how do those changes happen? God brings them about in our lives. He does it through his Word and Sacraments. People came to John the Baptist confessing their sins. What did John do? Did he say, "That's nice now shape up."? No John baptized them. He brought them God's forgiveness and pardon in a way that they were able to see and feel. This has happened to you and me also. Our sins were washed away and forgiven in our baptisms. God made an irrevocable promise to us when we were baptized. He assured us that he forgave all our sins and our sinful condition.

This forgiveness is what then empowers you and me to make changes in our lives and improve and correct our sinful conduct. During the last few months I was reminded of the power of God's Word to do just that. Someone that I just finished instructing made the comment to me after one of our classes, "I used to worry and fret over almost anything. I don't do that as much any more." Why is that? Because God's Word is powerful and as she has studied the Word and heard the promises of Jesus her faith has grown and she realizes that she doesn't have to worry and it doesn't do any good, because the Lord God is in control and he is going to work everything for her good. Another person that I just began instructing told me that her new car was recently damaged by someone in a mall parking lot. When she was called to the service desk and the person admitted the damage, she said he would have normally screamed and hollered at the woman, but she said, I was so calm, I surprised myself. What did that? It is the effect that God's Word has had on her heart and also her life.

As you and I prepare for Christmas the message of John the Baptist is still the same. Change. Our lives are ones of continual change. Daily we sin. Daily because of God's law we recognize and admit our failures, our sins, and our rebellion. Daily we hear God say to us in his Word and in the Blessed Sacrament, "I have forgiven you. I love you and accept you." Daily we receive God's pardon and strength and work to improve and correct our lives.

A Christian's entire life is one of repentance. For we daily sin and we need God's forgiveness every day. That is how we prepare for Christmas. We may do the decorating, the baking, and the buying of gifts. But true preparation is found in our own personal preparation – as God exposes our sins and makes us uncomfortable. God then picks us up and points us to the baby Jesus in the manger and says, "Here is your helper, your rescuer." Having pardoned us God says, "Go now and leave your life of sin. Go and live for me."

Amen.