

# REPENTANCE, BAPTISM, AND CONFESSION

Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday in Advent (Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12. In this gospel lesson, John the baptizer calls all people to repentance. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.' "

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Repent! All people everywhere should repent (Acts 17:30). Why? Because "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2). This is the message John proclaimed as he prepared the way for Jesus' appearing. Jesus, the king of heaven and earth, was already in the world. He was waiting to be revealed. So John came before him to prepare the hearts of the people to believe in Jesus. He preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And Jesus, when he finally appeared publicly, preached the exact same thing. In Matthew 4, when Jesus begins his public ministry, he says, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (4:17). It is word-for-word identical to John's message.

And the message is the same for us today. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

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What does it mean that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”? It means that it is near, or even that it is already here. That is because Jesus, the king of heaven and earth, has come to this world. So when John preached this, it was because Jesus was already in this world, and he was about to be revealed. It meant, *the kingdom of heaven is already here, and you will soon see it.*

And when Jesus preached this, it was because he is the king. The kingdom of heaven comes to earth in the flesh of Jesus Christ.

And we can still say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” because Jesus has promised to be with us always, so he is still in this world. And he will appear again in great glory. So we still say, “The kingdom is at hand.” It is here now, and the future glory of it is about to be revealed. And when the future glory of Jesus’ kingdom appears, all people will see it. It won’t be like the humble manger he first came to, because that first coming, even though it was so quiet and humble, was for the entire world. So when Jesus appears again in glory, it will again be for the entire world, and it will be visible to the entire world. It is here now, and it is about to be revealed in visible glory. So we should heed John’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

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John’s entire ministry can be summarized in one word: repentance. This is a rather significant Bible word. And it’s one of those words that we use quite often in church. Once in a while we slow down and define the word. But more often we just use the word without stopping to define it, because that’s what we do with most words. You can’t say much if you stop to define words all the time. But once in a while it is necessary to slow down and define a word. We’re going to do that now with the word “repentance.” So I hope you remember this a month from now, six months from now, and three years from now when you hear me use the word “repentance.”

I’m going to give you one bad way to define repentance and three good ways to define it. First, the bad way: repentance is you turning your life around. That’s the bad way. Unfortunately, this is also the most natural way for us to define repentance. You know how it is. We’re going the wrong way. We’re doing the wrong things. And the results turn out to be bad. So we say to ourselves, “I need to turn my life around,” or, “I need to get myself right with God.” And it may be true that we should stop doing bad things, and we should start doing good things. That is absolutely true. But that is not repentance. And God does not accept us on that basis. We cannot get ourselves right with God by turning our behavior around. We’re not even able to change our behavior all that much. We probably think we can, until we actually try it and learn that we cannot.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good” (*Mere Christianity*, Book III, chapter 11, p. 142). His point is that when we’re being bad, and we know we’re being bad, we live with the delusion that we could be good if we wanted to. We think the only reason we’re bad is because we want to be bad, but if we change our mind and want to be good, we could just as easily be good. But a person only thinks that who has not actually tried. It’s kind of ironic. If we embrace the fact that we are bad or just resign ourselves to that identity, we don’t really know how bad we really are. But if we have a sort of moral awakening, and we suddenly try to be good, then we learn that there is a powerful evil force within us. We learn that even when we want to do right, “evil lies close at hand” (Rom. 7:21). So Lewis goes on to say, “The main thing we learn from a serious attempt to practice the Christian virtues is that we fail” (*ibid*).

So if I think that repentance means that I turn my life around, and then I fail to turn it around, I will conclude that repentance just isn't possible for me. I will think that I am just too bad or too weak. And this is really tragic. It means I give up on repentance before I even know what it is.

The basic problem with this bad definition of repentance is that it depends on me. It teaches that repentance is something I do. But it's not. You do not cause your own repentance. Repentance is something God works in you.

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Now for the right way to define repentance. And I'll give you three right ways. And these aren't really three different definitions, but more like three ways of talking about the same thing.

First, we can refer to repentance as a "turning." The Hebrew word for repentance means "to turn" (שׁוּב). But we're not talking about turning from bad actions to good actions. Remember, that's the false view of repentance. But we can rightly say that repentance is a turning from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. And this is a really important distinction. If repentance means that I turn from bad actions to good actions, then I'm trusting in my own potential goodness. And if I'm trusting in my own potential goodness, then I'm not trusting in Jesus, and it's just another form of unbelief. But repentance is a turning away from sin and unbelief. It's even a turning away from a desire to make ourselves good. And it's turning to Jesus. It's trusting in him for forgiveness. It's trusting in him for righteousness. It's turning from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus. That's one way we can rightly define repentance.

Second, we can refer to repentance as a "change of mind." This is what the Greek word for repentance means (μετάνοια). It's a change of mind. Or it's a change that God works in our hearts so that we do not trust in ourselves, and we do not trust in any false gods. But God changes our hearts to trust in him. He changes us from unbelief to faith.

And third, we can say that repentance consists of two parts: contrition and faith. This is how our Lutheran Confessions define repentance. They say, "Now, strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven" (*Augsburg Confession*, XII, 3-5).

Part of the reason the Lutheran reformers defined repentance this way was to emphasize that our good works are not part of repentance. Repentance consists of two parts and *only* two parts: contrition and faith. They go on to say that "good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance" (*Augsburg Confession*, XII, 6). And this is in keeping with what John preached when he said, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8). Good works matter. God commands us to do them. But they are not repentance. Rather, they follow repentance as the fruit of a good tree. But, "Strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts: ... contrition [and] ... faith."

This isn't really a different definition from the first two, but it breaks repentance down into its two parts. These two parts describe the turning from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus. They describe the change God works so that we come to trust in Jesus Christ.

It starts with contrition. We become aware of our sins. And it's not just a mental acknowledgement that we did something wrong. That would be kind of cold. But we feel the terrors of conscience. We naturally resist this feeling. We want to hide our shame from God and from others. And we search for ways to justify ourselves, so that we don't have to feel that pain in our consciences.

This shame has devastating consequences in our relationships, both with God, and with other people. It causes us to hide or run away. Shame is a major cause of divorce. Often times, it's not the person who was sinned against that seeks divorce, but the other spouse, the one who stepped

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out. For that person, staying in the marriage is painful, because it reminds them of their shame. And they feel like the only way to escape that shame is to get out. They feel like they have to get away from the person they sinned against. That's doing the wrong thing with contrition. Contrition is actually good. It hurts, but it's necessary. God works it in our hearts to prepare us for the second part of repentance: faith in Jesus Christ. He is the answer to that contrition. So when you feel that contrition, or when you feel guilt, don't bury it. There is a better way.

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We see this better way in the ministry of John the Baptist. We can ask, "What does this repentance look like?" It's a turning. It's a change of mind. It's contrition and faith, but what does it actually look like to us? How do we experience it? In John's ministry, we see two things: Baptism and confession. "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" (3:6).

First, baptism. Baptism works repentance and, with it, the forgiveness of sins. I'm going to borrow a little bit from Mark and Luke. We're reading about John's ministry as Matthew recorded it. But the other three gospels also record it. And Mark and Luke both include this description of his preaching: they say that he was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). As John baptized sinners in the Jordan River, it actually worked repentance in their hearts. It turned them from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. It changed their hearts. We see evidence of this later in the Gospel of Luke, when people hear Jesus speak, and they believe him, Luke says, because they had been baptized by John, but the Pharisees and lawyers rejected Jesus, Luke says, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:29-30). Baptism had created that faith by which people accepted Jesus' preaching. It turned them and changed their hearts.

Baptism still does this work. It still turns our hearts. It still creates faith. Now, you might think that the pastor who baptized you is not as special as John. That's true. John was a special guy. And your pastor is not. But you do not receive your pastor's baptism. You are baptized into Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who commanded his Church to baptize. This is how he commanded his Church to make disciples. So we're not comparing John's baptism with your pastor's baptism. We're comparing John's baptism with Jesus' Baptism. And if John's baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins, you can be sure that Jesus' Baptism does at least as much.

Baptism works repentance by joining us to Jesus' death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:11-12). Being joined to Christ in Baptism, he takes our sins away from us. They become his. And he died with them on the cross. Our sin became his. Our death became his. And, just as we were joined to his death through Baptism, we are also joined to his resurrection. His righteousness becomes ours. His life becomes ours. Baptism turns us from sin and death to faith and life in Jesus.

Second, repentance takes the form of confession. As people were being baptized by John, they were confessing their sins. So that Baptism was God's response to their confession. It was his absolution. John baptized them for the forgiveness of their sins.

Baptism and confession are linked together. When we confess our sin, weekly and daily, we are returning to our Baptisms. There is one Baptism, so as long as we received a Christian Baptism, we never have to do it again. Once is enough. But we keep sinning, so we keep returning to the repentance of our Baptisms by confessing our sins.

And in confession, we can plainly see the two parts of repentance: contrition and faith. When we feel sorrow over sin, the only thing to do is confess that sin. This is the better way. Instead of bottling it up, and instead of trying to justify ourselves, the only thing to do is confess our sins.

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We confess our sins to the God-Man who suffered and died for those sins. That's contrition in action.

Then we trust the promise of Scripture that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. This second part is why we have confession of sin every Sunday morning. And it's why Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, encourages Christians to confess their sins privately in the presence of their pastor. The reason is that, just as an audible voice is given to your confession of sin, so an audible voice should also be given to the promise of forgiveness. Faith comes by hearing. That's the power of the absolution. You may think, *I already believe*. Good. But let your faith be strengthened by hearing God's promise of forgiveness when you confess your sin.

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This is repentance. It is not you getting yourself right with God. It is not you turning your life around. It is Jesus dying for you and rising on the third day. He took your sins upon himself, and he gives his perfect righteousness to you. We are sinful and unclean. You are sinful and unclean. And we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. Jesus paid for that. He forgives you. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.