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The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel, Matthew Chapter 3, verses 1 to 12.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

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In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Repentance—it’s a key theme of advent and clearly a focus of today’s Gospel reading. “Repent.” That word is the opening word spoken in today’s text. It’s not even softened with a sugar-coated preface. Human ears don’t like that word. It’s a word frowned upon and laughed at by society. It’s an idea that society says oozes with irresponsibility because it gets in the way of personal freedom in deciding and claiming for ourselves what we think is our right to have. Society protests: “How dare anyone else try to snuff out my right to have whatever I want, whenever I want it and tell me what I should and shouldn’t be doing!”

Even in the church it’s a word that grates and cuts against the grain of our human nature. “Outdated!” “Not progressive!” “Unloving!” “An impediment to mission!” we

might argue. Or, those of us who call the church to take a stand against immorality might be heartened when we hear the word ‘repent’—until we realise that word is spoken to the unacceptable things we think or say or do ourselves. Then we quickly get to work at building the self-justification fortress: “Repent!?! Me?! We’re not that bad!!” our old self protests. “OK, we’re not perfect, but we’re pretty good.”

John the Baptist didn’t come to tell people everything was ‘OK’. “Repent!” he calls. What an unusual sight he must have been, eating locusts and wearing garments made of camel’s hair, the food and attire of the very poor. As he stood there in the wilderness, the hot, uninhabited gorge through which the Jordan flows—itsself symbolic of the spiritual wasteland of the people’s hearts, devoid of any love for God—John drew people into a place where they were without the luxury, comforts, and security of their normal daily routine, to reflect on what they had prioritised in their life and how their priorities were at odds with God’s.

John saves the strictest rebuke for the Pharisees and Sadducees, very different religious sects in Israel, but with a common problem—they are assuming that because they were born into the covenant people Israel, they will be saved from the wrath to come simply because of their ancestry. Yet their hearts are far from God. They had all the external marks of religious respectability—and that is what they are trusting in. They have the false confidence that they have Abraham as their father and so have an automatic right to heaven. But they did not bring forth the fruit of genuine repentance and humility before God. John calls them to repent. He warns them the axe has gone far below the stump of the trees; it is already at the roots. Not so much as a twig will remain—God’s judgment is that they will be completely removed from the privileges he has given them.

Why does John make this call to repentance? Because the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Through the ages there have been so many predictions about how near the Kingdom of Heaven really is—even though Jesus teaches us that no-one knows the day or hour. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near”—those words can be hard for us to hear for other reasons—just how near is God’s Kingdom, given that these words were spoken some 2,000 years ago? How then can we be firm in hope that God’s Kingdom is near? Is it an empty promise?

Although we don’t know when God’s Kingdom will come again, we can know where it comes now. A kingdom is where ever its King rules over his subjects. In his explanation to the petition “Thy Kingdom come”, Luther explains in the Small Catechism: “God’s Kingdom comes indeed without our praying for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may

come also to us. 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 on earth now, and in heaven forever.”

With this understanding of the kingdom, it might be easier to see what the Baptist means when he says: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The Kingdom is near—close by—in Christ, the King of heaven, who came all the way from heaven down to earth, born in a stable at Bethlehem to be God with us. In him the kingdom has drawn close by to us, and indeed is in us, as Christ rules over our hearts and uses his authority and power to serve sinners and bless them with his grace and bring, love, forgiveness and joy. John was the one that Isaiah had spoken of in Isaiah 40:3-4:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

Isaiah says that mountains and hills are to be levelled and valleys raised up. The hills and valleys are symbolic of the sin in the human heart that separates people from God. Just as levelling mountains and raising valleys is a task beyond human ability, so too is making a way through sin to fellowship with God. It is a task that is utterly beyond human power. Only God is able to construct a way through such obstacles. He must prepare a highway to come to his people and deliver them. That is what Jesus does for us. Notice that our reading does not say: “Make a straight path so we can travel to him.” It says “Make a straight path for him to travel”. God has made the roadway and travelled it first in the person of Christ. He has come near to us.

He made the way straight for you in your baptism, where the rough ways and mountains and valleys in your heart were transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through God’s word. Christ came to you and washed you clean at the font and joined you to his own death and resurrection. You were born again from above and the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart, calling you to Christ through the Gospel—even if you were asleep and blissfully unaware of what was taking place, and even if you cried and squirmed and protested.

Since the Kingdom is so near in Christ who reaches out with God’s grace, it is only appropriate that all people should long to receive this Kingdom and turn to Christ with their sins for him to free them from them. John the Baptist’s call to repentance is for our ears too. It is not just to escape judgment but to receive grace. For us the call to

repentance is because, though Christ will come again, he is also already here. The freeway has been opened! In the person of Christ, the Kingdom of heaven is near, again, today. He has already spoken his absolution to you this morning. He has come with good news for you through the words of Scripture. He serves you this gospel as a holy meal that he hosts—his true body and precious blood. As he hands it to you he says: “This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

The Kingdom of Heaven is near. It is 2000 years closer than when John first spoke these words in the Judean wilderness. The Kingdom of Heaven is near to you as we, the church, live in the wilderness of this age—the wilderness of western materialism, spiritual supermarkets, and spiritual wasteland of living for the self. The Kingdom of Heaven is near to you as we live in a consumer age that looks to filling the valleys of loneliness and the potholes of anxiety with things that promise hope but can't give lasting peace. The Kingdom of Heaven is near to you as you live in a society with all its ethical and moral upheaval that has so many different ideas about what walking the straight path looks like, depending on opinion and trends. The Kingdom of Heaven is near to you as the church lives in a world that doesn't want to hear the call of John the Baptist and in some parts would do anything to drown it out.

In days like this many of us might groan and wonder “Lord, how long? How near is your return?”

Rejoice that the Kingdom of Heaven is near to you, because you have the Christ. When we hear John's words: “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near” we don't know when that is...but we do know where. Thinking of the Kingdom of Heaven being found close by is actually of far more help to you than speculative dates of Jesus' return. For when you look for the Kingdom of Heaven close by in worship; in God's word and sacraments and in devotional time in the word of God each day, there Christ meets you with all the treasures of his grace, forgiveness, life and salvation for you. Looking for him there with repentant hearts and open hands waiting to receive is the best way to prepare for Christmas and your Saviour's coming again—when he will take you to be with all the other saints of all times and places and serve you in the heavenly banquet that has no end.

Amen.