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## **The Second Sunday in Advent** **December 4, 2022**

### **Come, Lord Jesus—as Judge**

The arrival of the Son of God at a manger in Bethlehem marked the beginning of a new age. God entered our world as a child to forgive the sins of the world. He comes to us in his Word and sacraments to forgive our sins day after day. He will come again at the end of time as judge to save those who believed in his forgiveness and destroy those who did not. On the Second Sunday in Advent John the Baptist calls us to repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus as we live in his new age of grace.

### **Sermon** **Matthew 3:1-12**

**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 ax 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 for repentance. 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.”**

Introduction – So John the Baptist is in our sites today. It happens every year on the Second Sunday in the Advent Season. Some people even call this day *John the Baptist Sunday*, although he’ll be here next Sunday, too—same thing every year. We’ll hear a few references to John during the year, but John is never the center of attention except in Advent. He’s here in the Gospel today and we sing the hymn “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry Announces that the Lord Is Nigh.” Whenever we hear about John the Baptist and sing this hymn, we know that Christmas is just about here.

The strange thing is that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, John was still in diapers. He was six months old and his mother Elizabeth was still nursing him. Some people knew he was related to Jesus—cousins of some sort—and they knew about his relationship with Jesus—he was to be Jesus’ advance man—but when the first Christmas came, John was still cooing and crawling. The John in our sites this morning is an adult; 30 years have passed since Christmas. The Jesus John introduces isn’t a baby in a manger. He’s a grown man whom John is soon to baptize in the Jordan River.

The focus on John the Baptist in the Season of Advent reminds us that Advent is more than preparation for Christmas. That’s hard to straighten out in our brains sometimes because Christmas is everywhere we look. The trees are lit, the parties are planned, the gifts are bought, the carols are sung. We’re all thinking about Christmas. Not John. John isn’t looking back to Jesus’ birth; John is looking ahead to Jesus’ work, his actions, his message. The issue for John isn’t how Jesus came to us back then; the issue is how Jesus comes to us right now. John’s message isn’t “Get ready for

Christmas.” His message is “Get ready for the kingdom.” And so he said: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**

It's good for us to celebrate Christmas. The mystery and miracle of Jesus' birth thrills us every year. But John the Baptist prepares us for more that. So we'll hear him today:

### **The Baptist's Cry: The Lord Is Nigh**

The cry proclaims what we can expect from Jesus

The cry pleads for us to prepare for Jesus

1. There was never any confusion about John's role in the Christian story. In the last chapter of the Old Testament God declared that he would send a prophet to introduce the era that was coming. He would be a preacher like Elijah, God's greatest Old Testament prophet. When the angel Gabriel told John's father about the birth of his son, he quoted that promise: **He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** And that's what John did; he even dressed like Elijah with a **coat of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist.** He didn't preach in synagogues or the temple. John was a rugged man who did his work in rugged places and had a rugged message: **Repent.**

John's entire mission was to get people ready for Jesus. He made that perfectly clear: **After me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.** John didn't live to see the details—Herod took John's head off—but John understood the plan. He saw the new age was arriving with Jesus. He knew that Jesus was the son of Mary and the Son of God. He knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. John knew about Christmas and Good Friday and Easter, but John could see more. He could see Pentecost when Jesus would **baptize** his people with **the Holy Spirit and fire** and equip them to carry the message to the world. And John could see Judgment Day. He knew that Jesus would come again as Judge to bring believers home and send unbelievers to hell. He thundered: **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.** John saw the entire kingdom unfold. This kingdom wasn't the king's house but the king's administration. The kingdom of God wasn't where Jesus lived but what Jesus did. The Baptist's cry: The Lord is nigh let people know what they could expect from the king who was coming.

John the Baptist is long dead but his wilderness cry still points us to Jesus. The story of Jesus' work on earth is a 2,000-year-old story but the relevance of the story is new every day. Only the one who is truly divine and truly human can make promises to us that won't break. Only the one who obeyed perfectly and died innocently can forgive our sins every day. Only the one whom a tomb could not hold can guarantee our life with God. Only the one who sits at the Father's right hand can answer our prayers and guide and guard our lives. The reality is that Jesus is nearer to us than he was to John. Actually, Jesus' kingdom is here right now. The good news about Jesus is in the Word and baptism and Holy Communion and so the kingdom of heaven is as close to us as ears that hear and mouths that proclaim and eyes that see and fingers that turn the pages of our Bibles. So the Baptist's cry is for us: The Lord is nigh. Near enough to see what Jesus does for us every day.

2. Did you hear what John said? **Repent,** he said, **for the kingdom of heaven is near.** John knew that the people of Israel had pretty much lost their way of God. Their political ambitions, their pride in legal obedience, and sometimes plain old disinterest were all barriers and roadblocks that stood between them and God. God knew it, too, and he had Isaiah identify the problem. A voice had to come calling in the wilderness: **Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.** The barriers had to be removed; the roadblocks had to come down. And so John cried out: Turn away from your sins and believe in the one who is coming.

John's reputation got around. **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.** John's cry touched people's hearts. They came clean of their sins and John's baptism brought them God's forgiveness.

But that didn't happen with everyone. The do-gooders and the high and mighty weren't about to change anything. **When John 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.** John saw right through their fake piety and their arrogant haughtiness. They weren't dismantling the barriers and the roadblocks; they were building them higher. Their path to God was blocked; the kingdom was near, but they would never enter it.

There aren't any Pharisees or Sadducees in church today and I'm not going to call you a brood of vipers. But there is something here for us to think about. We all need to be on guard against going through the motions. The sinful self that lives in all of us assumes that putting in our time is enough: Come to church, take communion, fill the envelope. We confess all our sins except our favorite ones and those we keep committing. We kind of expect that once a Lutheran, always a Lutheran. John says: It doesn't work that way.

The Baptist's cry that the Lord is nigh pleads with us to prepare for the Savior's coming not just at Christmas but every day: to hear the Word and believe it as the one thing needful in our lives; to remember our baptisms and drown our sins every day; to eat the bread and drink from the cup and trust that the body and blood of Jesus takes our sins away; to begin each day and end each day with the reality of our own sin and the assurance of Jesus' forgiveness; to live our lives with Jesus' power and to endure our troubles with Jesus' peace. Jesus is here now: As John would tell us: **Repent and believe.** Amen.