

## SERMON “REPENT AND COME ON IN”

(Matthew 3:1-12 Preached at MPC on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016)

Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, Matthew gives us a text that focuses on a theme of watchfulness and being prepared for Jesus’ second coming—we know traditionally Advent is also the season of preparation for Christ’s birth, the Lord’s first coming—but the commercialism of our secular society and the world stands in direct conflict and tension with God’s plan and promise to bring to fulfillment the coming of the Messiah—the birth of the Christ child marks a new beginning—a transition to focus on the themes of repentance and baptism—this is articulated in our text for today with the coming of a new “trailblazer”—the prophet John the Baptist sent to pave and prepare the way for coming of the Lord Jesus.

The second chapter of Matthew tells us several things: it tells us about the visit of the Wise Men to the baby Jesus. About Joseph fleeing with his little family to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod. About an angel telling Joseph that Herod is dead, Joseph and his family can go home. And about Joseph settling his little family in Nazareth of Galilee.

In chapter two, Jesus was still a baby—or maybe a toddler. His cousin John was six months older than Jesus, so he, too, would have been a toddler. But chapter three fast-forwards to a much later time. John the Baptist, who was a small child at the end of chapter two, has grown up. He has not only grown up, but has discovered a gift for preaching—prophetic preaching—the kind of preaching that shakes people to their roots—the kind of preaching that turns the world upside down.

We don't often encounter that kind of preacher. We would like to—or so we think. We would love to hear the thunder and lightning that only an especially gifted preacher can summons. No one went to sleep when John was preaching. He was the kind of preacher who could fill the pews. John did that. He filled the pews—although there weren't really pews where John preached. He didn't preach in a church—or even in a big tent. He didn't have pews—or even wooden benches.

John was preaching in the wilderness—the desert wilderness. There weren't many people in the wilderness—just a few shepherds and their sheep. But somehow the word

got around, and people came to hear John preach. Matthew tells us that they came from Jerusalem, the big city—and from Judea, the province where Jerusalem was located—and from all the region around the Jordan River.

Going into the wilderness wasn't for the fainthearted. There wasn't much food or water in the wilderness. There was creepy-crawly reptiles--and slithering snakes--and rocks and sand. People venturing into the wilderness were advised to carry water and food—and a good map. They were advised not to start such a journey unless they were in good physical shape. The wilderness was no place for the lame and weak of heart.

But people came in droves to hear John, because they heard people saying, "You've never heard anything like this." They were saying, "He changed my life." When they got there, they heard a short sermon. John said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (v. 2). Oh, I'm sure that John fleshed it out beyond those nine words. But those nine words tell us everything we need to know about John's preaching.

"Repent!" What does that word mean? Some think that it means, "Feel bad! Feel guilty!" But repentance is far more than feeling guilty. Repentance involves feeling bad enough that you WANT to change. Repentance involves feeling bad enough that you WILL change. Repentance involves turning your life around and going in a new direction. In fact, the Greek word for repent became an army command—the equivalent of "About face!" Anyone who has served in the military knows "About face!" When a soldier hears "About face", he or she knows that it means to turn and march in the opposite direction—a 180 degree turn.

So, John was calling people to repent—to change the direction of their lives—to learn to love what they had hated—and to hate that which they had loved. Repentance means learning to love God and neighbor, and to stop loving the Almighty Dollar.

And John began his sermons with the word "Repent!" And then he said, "For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." That was the reason they were to repent. "The Kingdom of Heaven was at hand." A new era was about to begin. God was about to break into the world and turn things upside down.

That was Good News for people who were prepared—who had turned their lives toward God and away from the things of this world. But it was Bad News for those who had not

prepared--for people who had never made a place in their hearts for God. So, John preached, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." We could hear that as a dismal sermon, rather like the people who carry around signs saying, "Repent, the world is coming to an end." But I hear John's sermon as hopeful—encouraging—a Good News sermon—the promise of good things coming soon. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

What is the Kingdom of Heaven, anyway? It's the place where God reigns—where God's will is done! That kingdom has already come in God's Son Jesus Christ, at least in part. The Kingdom of Heaven has come in our lives when we embrace Christ as the king of our lives—when we decide to follow Christ and let him direct our pathways.

That has happened, however imperfectly, in my life and yours. We have embraced Jesus Christ. We have chosen to follow him as best we can. We are different, because we have Christ at the center of our lives. I am not perfect, but I hate to think of the person I would have been without Christ. The same is true for you. Our relationship with Christ has changed our lives.

Now just stop and consider what it will be when the Kingdom of Heaven is fully realized: There will be peace—no need for wars and military forces. There will be harmony—no need for police forces. There will be rampant honesty—no need for locks on our doors and security systems. People will love and take care of each other—no need for shelters for abused women—no need for welfare programs—no need for foster homes or orphanages.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, saying, "Thy kingdom come!" that's what we are praying for. We are praying for the redeemed world where people act in accord with God's will. That's in the future, though. We aren't there yet. The world in which we live today doesn't look much like that.

But we get glimpses of that perfect world here and there. I am privileged to work among people who have embraced Christ and who allow him to direct their pathways. I'm talking about you—the good people of MPC! You don't do that perfectly, any more than I do—but we try, and sometimes we succeed. Sometimes people looking at us can see Christ—because our lives reflect the love of Christ—and Christ's concern for those who are vulnerable.

Let me close with a story. It is and isn't a true story. It came out of Hollywood in a movie called "Tender Mercies." It starred Robert Duvall as Mack Slade, a down-and-out country singer. The story of Mack Slade is fictional, but we have all met a Mack Slade at some point in our lives. We have all known someone who has allowed Christ to set his or her life right-side up after lots of years of living upside down.

In the movie, Slade had come to the point in his life where he was beginning to put his ruined life together. A part of that process was being baptized in a small Baptist church in a small Texas town. Baptists, of course, baptize by immersion. Their little church had a baptistery—a pool of water into which the minister and the baptismal candidate waded. The baptistery backdrop was a painting of John the Baptist at the River Jordan. The minister wore hip-boots to perform the baptism. He dipped Slade under the water and raised him up dripping wet. Slade retired to a back room to dry off and dress.

It was a touching movie. I have seen people baptized like that, and I have witnessed the changes in their lives. I came away rooting for Mack Slade. After seeing that movie, I read an article by a Catholic priest who had also seen it. The baptism as portrayed in the movie is very different from the priest's tradition, and a part of him didn't like it. But he had this to say about it. He said: "The ceremony almost seemed 'corny'—But there was no doubt that everyone was serious about it." And when the camera panned to Mack's new wife in the choir, there was no doubt that she believed that Jesus who is Lord and savior had touched (Slade) at this moment.

We probably have a Mack Slade or two in our midst today—people who have turned their ruined lives over to Jesus—and have begun to get the feel of new life lived in the Kingdom of Heaven. But that initial repentance is just a first step. That's the one where we make an "About face"—a 180 degree turn—where we turn from one kind of life to an entirely different and new way of living.

As we go through life here at MPC, as new challenges and trials present themselves, we must stay focused daily on repentance. We need to constantly make those small course corrections and directions in our relationship to God, our families, our friends, our co-workers and even strangers we meet. And repentance is not something we do just once when we become Christians and then are baptized. Sometimes it is a complete rerouting and turning one's life around 180 degrees. The Apostle Paul was Saul the great

persecutor of the early church, can testify to that rerouting along with many others, your pastor included.

Daily repentance is dealing with the small things of everyday life that crop up and if not addressed, **Not Nipped** in the bud, the seeds can take root and become a stronghold in ones' life. I'm talking about a little bit of anger—an unkind word, negative or critical remark—a spot of jealousy or envy—an indifferent or uncompassionate response to someone in need—an adulterous inclination—an impatient attitude—being ungrateful—the possibilities are endless. For the world, as we approach the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pearl Harbor this Wednesday, I pray for a repentance that will turn all nations from war to lasting peace—this will come when Jesus returns.

My friends, as we make the shift from hope on the first Sunday into our second Advent Sunday's theme of "Peace," God has already prepared the way for us to fellowship with Him for all eternity through our faith in the birth of his Son Jesus Christ. Let us remember to count our blessings—count our successes—and to confess our sins openly before Christ. God has prepared the way for the nation of Israel as well as all nations of the world to receive the gift of salvation. Let God fully examine us and bring everything out in the open—Jesus says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

Let me invite you to consider for a moment how you need to repent. What are you doing that is contrary to God's will? What do you need to change to become fit to set foot in the Kingdom of Heaven? And let me close by quoting John the Baptist: "Repent!" he said. "For the Kingdom of God is at hand." And so, it is. It's right here—right now. Repent, and come on in. Amen! Let us pray.

