

## “The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. What do these few words mean to you? You probably didn't stay awake last night because you couldn't wait to hear these words spoken to you today. These words were powerful the first time they were spoken by John the Baptist to those that heard them, and their power is no less today in your ears. It is good for us on this second Sunday in Advent and place ourselves on the banks of the Jordan River and listen again to the voice crying out in the wilderness who declared, “Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near.” and experience in this place and time what these words mean for you and me still today.

Throughout scripture, God sends his word out to unlikely places with amazing results. God spoke into the darkness and chaos before creation and said, “Let there be light.” and the world was changed from a world of nothing to a world of abundant life. God sent Elijah into a valley of dry bones and told Elijah to tell those skeletons who had no ears to “Hear the word of the Lord.” How ridiculous of a place to be sent to preach. But the word of the Lord did as they intended, and the dry bones rattled together, and they lived again. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, one of the vilest of cities to preach these words, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” and before Jonah repeated these words a second time to ensure that more people heard them, the message was heard by everyone, and the entire city of Nineveh repented of their previous sinful life and turned to a new way of living.

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, these words that John was sent to deliver make about as much sense as God speaking to darkness before the dawn of creation or Elijah preaching to a valley of dry bones or Jonah preaching to a city that only had wickedness in their hearts. It wasn't that the people weren't waiting to hear from the Lord since the Lord had been silent for over four centuries. But John was not sent to a place where many people were already gathered, instead he was sent into the wilderness, next to a muddy river, where there was hardly an ear to hear him cry, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” But then, just like out of the valley of dry bones, masses of people started to rise from Jerusalem and Judea to come and hear the message that John was sent to preach. It really does make sense that John was sent into the wilderness or the desert to call people to repentance. God's chosen people throughout the ages have been found wandering in the wilderness. God appears where there is nothing and creates newness and life.

John the Baptist had been sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord uses this roadbuilding language to illustrate how this happens. Since August, I have traveled west on I-90 three different times and have watched the progress of how rebuilding of a once rough road is made into a straight path.

The first step in preparing a new road is to eliminate the old road. The new road is not built on top of what was already there. The old is dug out and crushed and removed. If there are dangerous low places or high places that prevent easy access to where the road leads, they are made level to ensure a straighter path to where you are heading. When you are used to traveling on a safe interstate but must travel on the other side for several miles in two-way traffic you notice the dangers that are coming toward you. This is what John meant by saying, the one coming after him is greater than he. You can see the other side that is almost ready. The completion is near, but not quite yet. You can point to the path you would rather take, but until it is complete you must travel where you are.

John prepared the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance. Repentance is a complete removal of your old nature before creating new life in you. Confessing your sins reveals to God what has prevented you from being on a straight path to him.

John noticed the differences in the two types of people who came to hear his voice in the wilderness. The first group that came to him did exactly what he said when he said, “Repent”. They knew that they had come near to God. They knew the words that John the Baptist came directly from a powerful God who had authority to condemn or to deliver salvation. When they heard John cry, “Repent”, they knew they had nothing to offer but their sins and when they did, they immediately were baptized and washed clean in the river Jordan.

John also noticed another group coming to him, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. They were not convinced that the words from John were the words from God himself. None of them came to confess their sins. The offerings they brought to the river were their good works by keeping the Ten Commandments. They had no fear of the Lord when heaven came near to them. They might have even taken pleasure watching the sinners confess their sins and be baptized, but they didn't realize they too needed to turn from the pride that was in their hearts.

This past Monday night, I thought I was healed enough from my hip surgery to drive myself to Baltic for bible study. I first realized that I couldn't get into my pickup without the aid of a footstool. My swollen right leg wasn't as steady as I wanted it to be to run the accelerator. But I thought I could manage for the few miles I had to drive. I got to church and parked next to the curb which served as my footstool to more easily get out and back into my pickup after the bible study.

I was pleased with what I had accomplished until I got about a mile west of town. The deputies had discovered a perfect place to park on the south side of the road next to the FFA sign. You can't see any evidence of their vehicle until you pass by. Just when you have left the 25-mph speed zone, you can have a false sense of freedom to do as you please. This was not the first time I have seen them park there, but I was not looking for them that night and when I passed by them, I immediately began to confess my sins. I knew I wasn't driving real fast, but I certainly could have been going over 55. I wondered if I could have drifted across the center line at some point, they might have noticed that I didn't. I hadn't taken any pain meds for a couple days, but I really didn't know how long they stayed in my system. I wondered if all the lights on my vehicle were working and if I had put the new proof of insurance card in this vehicle. The appearance of the law in the desert-like place along the side of the road caused a fear in me and without even being stopped, I began to confess my sins. I was thankful that I wasn't stopped and that they didn't have to tell me what I had done wrong. If I had been stopped, I had already decided my best defense would not have been to inform the deputy of my good works that evening and that I had just come from the church teaching a bible study. This would have been like the Pharisees and Sadducees' who after hearing the words of John didn't not confess their sins but flaunted their good works and that announced what good family they came from.

The kingdom of heaven has come near you today. You have confessed your sins and you are forgiven. Heaven will come even nearer to you today as you receive the Lord's supper and hear once more that you are forgiven. The pathway to the Lord has been cleared so that you will leave this place knowing that you are connected to Jesus and knowing this, you can do nothing else but leave this place and bear good fruit.  
Amen