

Wednesday of Populus Zion, A ✕ D 2008

Matthew 3:1-12 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ 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.'" ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "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 with fire. ¹² 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."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Remember, repent, rejoice. The rhythm of the season of Advent continues. Remember, repent, rejoice. Remember the Lord's intervention in history, through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, to redeem humanity. Remember His gracious intervention into your life, to deliver to you the precious forgiveness of sins in the waters of Holy Baptism. And, remembering all the Lord has done and continues to do for you, repent for your lapse in memory. Repent for your tendency to forget, your tendency to go back to your old master, your unwillingness to bear the cross of the daily Christian life. And rejoice. Rejoice that God spared no expense to buy you from your slavery to sin. Rejoice that He reconciled you to Himself apart from your ability to deserve it. Rejoice that He has given you this holy season with its cadence: remember, repent, rejoice.

2 There's no singing "Joy to the World" during Advent. Advent is not joyous, at least not at that magnitude. Sure, there's plenty of joy in Advent, but there's also plenty of grief. Not false grief, not worldly grief. Worldly grief bemoans the loss of things the world treasures: financial security, popularity and prestige, happiness and success. But worldly grief has only one result: death. But there is another kind of grief, a kind that leads through death into life: godly grief. This is the grief of Advent. "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret" (2 Cor 7:10).

3 We put up a lot of decorations to make things prettier than they really are. But this decoration of repentance acknowledges how ugly things really are. Repentance allows the heart to be seen as it truly is. Don't forget this decoration in the season of Advent. How do you decorate with repentance? Decorate inside yourself. Here's where tinsel and tape fail, garland and glitter disappoint, wreaths and wraps dissatisfy. Learn from King David, the most beloved hymn writer of all time: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 51:16-17). Repentance, not outwardly, but inwardly, and godly contrition are what the Lord most wants to see as decorations this year.

4 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. It's the nature of the season of Advent.

5 Not just Advent, though, your whole life is one of repentance and godly grief over your sins. It's the product of your baptism. What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires. Daily contrition and repentance: it's the Christian's life. The first of the 95 Theses said, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be constant repentance."

6 Being constantly repentant is the broken and contrite heart that God not only does not despise but loves. He is the Lord who came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Despair over your sin is the admission that you need someone else to deliver you from that sinfulness. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Godly grief over your sins is a good gift from God. Repentance is not your own

creation. Repentance is never the final gift. It's always followed by forgiveness.

Despairing of your ability to deliver yourself from sin's clutches is soothed by the One whose coming was solely to deliver you from the power of sin and death. Your broken and contrite heart is healed with His word of Holy Absolution.

7 That's not just Christmas joy, that's eternal joy. That's not just the knowledge of a baby in a manger, but faith in the baby born to be the Crucified Lord. It's not just seasonal happiness; it's eternal life. It's not a half-hearted wish for Christmas spirit; it's the confident trust in a Savior from sin. Repentance and forgiveness are thus your sources of joy not just in Advent, but all year-long.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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