

“Repent from stupidity!” Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 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.’”

Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. 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. “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 fire. 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Sin makes us stupid. Yes, it does. Our sinful condition makes us stupid. It makes us into fools, regardless of how high our IQ may be. And it is not that hard to demonstrate it, it is rather obvious, right into our faces.

Think about this ... how do people react, what is the attitude of our hearts when we hear that the true God, the Creator of the Universe has some words of wisdom to say to us. Are we intrigued; do we want to listen?! ... Tragically too often even we, Christians, are not too interested.

Imagine our reaction to this news: “Breaking news, the true God, the Creator of everything that exists has revealed Himself to us and has a message that everyone needs to hear, the message that will change your life forever.” How does it sound?

Do people get intrigued and excited when they hear something like that? Most of the time, not at all. But now, for the sake of an experiment, let’s replace the true God with something else and see how that sounds and feels?

“Breaking news, an extra-terrestrial intelligence, aliens, have revealed themselves to us and they have a message that everyone needs to hear, the message that will change your life forever.” So... how does it sound? What do you think, which one of these would get more attention among our fellow humans?

Yes, our sinful condition makes us stupid. Whenever there is a message from true God, something happens with us, we immediately become suspicious, we immediately perceive it as an attack on our freedom, as a restriction, as something negative being imposed on us. And to an extent this is true for Christians as well.

Today we read one such message from our God, which has been perceived exactly that way since the beginning. “Repent! Repent!” This one has never been popular; it has always caused resistance and more.

Think about John the Baptist in our today’s Gospel reading. Where did he live, how did he dress, what did he eat? In the wilderness, he **“wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, his food was locusts and wild honey.”**

Why? There may be several answers. He was in the desert as the nation of Israel was in the desert on its way to the promised land. Perhaps, John calls Israel out of that land to return to their God and then re-enter the land as God’s people.

But there may be another explanation as well. We don’t like when we are called to repentance. We don’t like to hear God’s message. What do people want to do with those who bring messages that we don’t like?

They want to threaten them, they want to drive them away, they want to cast them out, they want to take away their income, they want to get rid of them. By all means. Remember what happened to John, to Jesus.

They chopped off John’s head. They crucified Jesus. The same tactics are used even today and even in our church. Marginalize those messengers of repentance, fire them, get rid of them! There seems to be a great wisdom seen in John’s ministry.

No one could cast him out or drive away. He already was in the wilderness. No one could threaten his income or take away his stuff, he already had nothing. No one could deprive him of his comfort, for he already lived in the wilderness.

Perhaps, there is something we too could learn from that. But let’s get back to that word, to that unpleasant message “repent!”. Sin does make us stupid. Us Christians too. We too tend to shiver from this gentle invitation “repent!”

We don’t get what it means. Too many churches tend to perceive this “repent!” as something negative, restrictive. As something that we need to be ashamed of. Something that we don’t want others to see.

Some remains from ancient and less enlightened times. Something that does belong in our cowardly, sorry! I meant loving and inclusive 21st century church. As something that we don’t want non-Christians to hear. No...

Let's instead focus on pleasing people, saying positive things, assuring them that God doesn't really expect anything from them, except that they would feel good about themselves, free to do whatever their hearts desire, and that God's sacred obligation is to welcome and include and accept them, etc.

Sadly, but we see too much of this around. Even in our Lutheran Church. Too often. We may benefit from being spanked by John the Baptist: **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"**

Let's get to the heart of the issue. What does this "repent" mean, any why did all God's messengers in the OT, and in the NT times, prophets, John, Jesus, the apostles, why did they all begin their message with "repent"?

To understand this "repent" properly, we need to take it as John proclaimed it: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** So, what does this mean? Obviously, this "repent" has something to do with the Kingdom of Heaven, or we can also call it the Kingdom of God, as Scripture uses both of these.

What is this Kingdom of God that we need to repent because of its closeness? When we hear the word "kingdom" we may picture a geographical territory. Much better translation would be a "reign" of God. Active reign of God among us. The Triune God has come to reign among us as He brings forth His New Creation.

Let's reflect on this a bit more, for it is so important to get this right. Where there is a kingdom, there is a king. And when you have a king, then you can evaluate **what sort of person he is, how he reigns, what his goals are and what it means for us.**

Let's do this, and let's compare this king, the true God, with his chief adversary. You see, all those who brought the message "repent" proclaimed to us this one reality – that we, and all people, we have only two options.

Two ways, the way of death or the way of life. We may be either under the reign of the true God, or we will be under the reign of His adversary. We will either live under God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, or we will fade away under the reign of Satan. Those are the only two options before us.

There is no third neutral option. Let's briefly compare **what these two rulers are like, how they rule, what their goals are and what it means for us.** Then we will see properly what this "repent" is all about.

Satan. As Jesus explains, Satan **"was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."** (John 8:44)

A liar and murderer who hates you. His goals are to separate you from true God, so that you are doomed for the eternal destruction that is already prepared for him and his fallen angels. His way of ruling fully corresponds to his nature.

He lies and deceives. He tempts and accuses. He enslaves us with false promises, he convinces us to rely on created things to deliver what only true God can give us. And, yes, He comes disguised as an angel of light.

But he comes to steal your joy and peace and to destroy your very life forever. That's who he is and that's how he rules remaining in the shadows. That is one of our options. The default one according to our fallen nature. To be under this ruler.

The other alternative is the true God, who has revealed Himself as God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What is He like? Let's see! He is God who chose you before the foundation of the world to be with Him.

He is God who knitted you together in your mother's womb, that's why you are so fearfully and wonderfully made. He is God who opens His hand and satisfies desires of every living thing. Yours too.

He is God who "so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). He is God who showed His love for us "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). He is God who always loves you first and seeks you first. Always.

What are His goals? He is very open about them. He wants you to know Him as your God, He wants to rescue you from the slavery to sin and death and devil, He wants to restore your relationships with Him, He wants you with Him when He brings forth His New Creation, New Heavens and New Earth. He desires that you would reign with Him forever in everlasting joy and blessedness.

How does He rule? He is both, the Almighty Creator, all-powerful, no one will escape His justice, no one and nothing can stop Him from keeping His promises. At the same time, He is our gentle shepherd, He gathers us as His lambs in His arms; He carries us in His bosom, He gently leads us. (Is 40:9-10)

He hasn't come to be served, He has come to serve and to give His life for many (Mark 10:45). "He emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2:7-8)

Why did He do all of that? For you! For you, dear brothers and sisters! These are our only two options. To wither away under the power of Satan, or to live under the reign of the true God. It's not that hard to see which one is better for us.

Now, back to "repent!" What does this mean? It means the best news for you! You are not left to perish under the rule of Satan. You are not forgotten. The true God is sending His cavalry to rescue you. He has not, and never will give up on you.

"Repent! Grab the rope that I am throwing to you! Let me rescue you! This is why I came; this is why I call you!" "Repent" is about "delivering us from the domain of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of God's beloved Son." (Col 1:13)

“Repent” is about being freed from slavery. It is about being delivered from lies and deception to know the truth. It is about being rescued from the jaws of death into life, eternal life. It is about calling us to turn away from fading temptations and false hopes to God’s unchanging promises and life under His divine protection.

It is about escaping from under the power of liar and murderer and being embraced by the Triune God in the most intimate loving fellowship of all His saints. “Repent” is about all of this and more. It is the most joyful invitation from our God.

“Come, come to me, and I will bless you!” One can only wonder how stupid sin makes us. How can we lose our understanding about this most majestic gift and begin to perceive it as something negative, something restrictive or embarrassing.

Finally, what does this mean for us? **“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”** Our God doesn’t just rescue us from our old life, He gives us a new life. Under His reign, where He enables us to bear abundant good fruits, 30 and 60 and 100-fold.

What are those fruits? It is not just about not-sinching. It is about being free to live as God’s people, under His provision, under His care, under His blessings, nourished by His Spirit, heading towards eternal life with Christ.

What should our fruits be? The sky’s the limit. Our God has placed infinite opportunities before us. He has. As Luther wrote, even if we had five heads and ten hands, we couldn’t do everything that’s before us.

We may pour ourselves out serving everyone in our lives. Or be courageous and passionate about rescuing others from under the rule of Satan and bringing them into God’s Kingdom, here or abroad. We may respond to God’s call and travel to distant lands to preach the Gospel as our dear Lockwood’s are about to do.

We may support those mission fields where God’s Spirit brings in a rich harvest. We may fight for persecuted brothers and sisters. We may work to keep the Gospel pure for next generations, we may become true prayer warriors.

You can do this and much more. For you are free. You are rescued. You are as John said Jesus’ little grains of wheat that He will gather to Himself. Grains... seemingly small and insignificant, but so, so important to Him. And the day comes when from these little grains God will bring forth His harvest of the most beautiful beings, His children, to reign with Him forever.

The call “repent” is nothing else than God’s invitation to receive all of this. May He Himself help us not to be stupid, but daily rejoice in this call. So that day by day we would gladly repent and rejoice living our new life under our new king, Jesus Christ. Amen.