

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, December 4, 2022

Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah 11:1-10

Well, that's not very Christmasy, is it? John the Baptist standing out in the middle of nowhere, yelling. I mean, he's not even got any Christmasy clothes on. No Advent blue. No red and green tie. No Santa hat.

You know, in one of my former parishes, there was a woman who wore a different Christmas sweater every day from Thanksgiving till New Years' Day. She had Santa and Rudolf, and a Christmas tree with real lights that really lit up.

Yes, and what does John the Baptist have? Nothing but a camel's hair cloak and animal skin belt, just like Elijah did back in the ancient days. Because John the Baptist represents the return of Elijah, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

So, maybe John the Baptist does bring us toward Christmas. Because at Christmas, Jesus, the Messiah comes.

What is the first word out of John the Baptist's mouth? "Repent." "Meta-noia," which means "change your mind, change your attitude, change the way you think, change what you do."

That's not easy. Often, our ways of thinking lie close to the inner core of who we are. Our attitudes are precious to us, as are our ways of life.

But doesn't Christmas require us to change? Doesn't Christmas require that we give up our arrogant pride, our self-superior idealism, our despair, our comfortable, worldly-wise, cynicism, and come to a manger, to the child of a pregnant teenager?

We follow a refugee king. We look for angels, literally an army of angels that does not march down the street clomping their boots on the pavement but instead, sings.

“Repent,” Says John the Baptist, “for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Think of the most ridiculously, preposterously, impossibly hopeful and joyful thing that could happen in your world, in your family, in your own soul. Isaiah suggests one vision

The wolf will lie down with the lamb.

That’s ridiculous. Isn’t it the nature of things that the strong devour the weak, that the wolf destroys the lamb? But Isaiah sees this.

“The lion and fatling and calf together. . .and a little child shall lead them.”

That’s what the prophet sees as the kingdom of heaven. And this kingdom is not just floating around somewhere in the stratosphere, a wonderful set of ideas to which we aspire. It is not just waiting for us in some future age that we might achieve some day. The kingdom of heaven is close. The dreams, the hopes of God are close as breath.

So, here is something that might illustrate a little of what I mean.

Many years ago, I served in a relatively small parish that had a relatively big mortgage. When money is really tight in the congregation, as in a family, it can put a damper on everything. It just stands in the background, like a worry that won’t go away. It can makes us feel like we’re not really a church, or even not really a person.

In this congregation, though, we also had a food pantry. When you deal with people who are in the midst of hard times, that also can stand as a worry. It’s as if it doesn’t matter how many people you help, or how much you help, there is still another person in need and another obstacle to overcome. The forces that make people hungry and keep people hungry seem unstoppable, and a tiny food pantry seems like nothing.

Nevertheless, one Advent Sunday I preached about our food pantry. It was a special thing. Unlike most other food pantry in that time and place, we did not require proof

of low income. We did not require a driver's license or proof of citizenship. And we let people choose what they needed from the pantry themselves.

I will tell you, people stood taller when I told them "All we need is your name, so we can pray for you." They would say, "I would go hungry myself, but I have kids in the house that I have to feed." I would ask, "Is there anything you would like us to pray about?" They would tell about aunts and uncles with cancer, children in jail, cousins on drugs. Always, always they wanted to pray.

I think, maybe three or four times in the fourteen years I was there, people took advantage of our way of doing things. But those times were far outweighed by the dignity everyone else felt when they came to the church for help.

So, I preached about this food pantry one Sunday in Advent, and in the congregation, leaning against his mother, was a kid I'll name Jason. Jason's family life was not completely easy. His father had been a firefighter, and had been wounded on the job. But the disability was still in litigation. So, Dad was at home, feeling helpless and in pain, all the time. Mom worked to try to make ends meet. Christmas was not exactly piles and piles of presents for Jason and his brother and sister.

Christmas Eve came. We had the Christmas tree and the lights and the candles and we sang Silent Night, even though behind it all there was still the mortgage and the family that had showed up right before service asking for help.

Afterward I was putting things away, and Jason's mom comes up to me. Jason is kind of leaning against her hip, half behind her. She says, "Pastor. Andy?" I say, "Yes," She says, "Jason has something he wants to give you." I say, "Oh, that's nice. What is it?" And I'm expecting a paper drawing or a card with magic marker picture on it like sometimes kids give to me and it's really nice. Jason's mom hands me eight dollars. She says, "That's his Christmas money. He wants to give it to the food pantry." I said, "Really?" She says, "Really."

Suddenly, my way of looking at the world changed. The mortgage did not loom as strongly anymore. It was there, but it didn't matter as much. And the food pantry didn't seem as tiny any more. It couldn't feed everyone, still, huge forces keeping people in food insecurity. But that food pantry seemed a whole lot bigger. And huge, giant towering over it all, was the kindness of an eight year old. That was the kingdom of heaven.

John the Baptist says, “get ready for the Christ to come. Repent, change your way of looking at things, of doing things. The kingdom of heaven is close.”