

Sermon on **Matthew 3:1-12** for Advent 2 -12.8.19  
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – New Ulm – Pastor N. Scharf  
**A Kingdom Worth Waiting For...**

It's time to party! Let's get ready to rumble...! Now the moment we've all been waiting for! It's time to go! There are plenty of famous and commonplace ways to announce something big and exciting is about to happen or something difficult and unavoidable is going to take place. More importantly though, we want to be prepared for such things – good or bad. In 1922 Emily Post published her book, *“Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage.”* In it you can find all kinds of ways to be prepared for just about any event. You have “formal and ceremonial introductions” a how-to on introducing a dignitary or yourself properly. She tells us how to be ready for “Formal dinners in private homes,” or “Balls and dances,” with helpful instructions for the ushers, the dancers, the guests and the hosts. Even information on events ranging from “an invitation to the white house” all the way to “hosting a barbecue” is in there – and it's more than just “have a grill, a cooler, and some can-coozies.” The goal of the book is that whether you are host or guest or a helper – you are prepared and ready.

God wanted and wants his people to be ready for Jesus' arrival and Jesus' banquet. That's why he sent the original Emily Post – John the Baptist. John the Baptist readies our hearts for the greatest event, the greatest moment of our lives – Jesus' arrival. It is **“A Kingdom Worth Waiting For...”**

*“In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea.”* In every respect John mimics the ministry of Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe, a prophet sent by God to a nation in deep need of repentance. John does his preaching in the wilderness – the desert of Judea. John the Baptist was the promised Elijah. Like Elijah, John's ministry would prepare the people's hearts for Jesus. Those who cared or were curious or cautious could come and hear this preacher.

*“Saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* Repentance is only truly worked by God. It is the U-turn sign that you are thankful you saw before barreling down the dirt road over the edge of a cliff. It is the change of mind and, by God's grace, heart, when you're enabled to see the error of your ways and turn in remorse and guilt to see the only one who can take it from you – Jesus. This message of *“the kingdom of heaven”* was also what Jesus preached. Everything John preaches about; Jesus will preach about too. All four Gospel writers record the ministry of John the Baptist. *“The kingdom of heaven,” “the kingdom of God”* is Christ's ruling in the hearts of believers by faith. The Holy Spirit works this through John' and Jesus' warning, *“Repent,”* and by the comforting promise of the Gospel – Forgiveness, life and salvation – Jesus' gift to you.

*“This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”* Isaiah foretold John's work – to prepare hearts, for the Lord's arrival. The Savior of the world was coming to his people. Would they miss, reject or receive him? God sent his forerunner out of love and necessity to sinful hearts so that when the Lord arrives we welcome him aright.

*“John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.”* John's clothing and demeanor were same as Elijah. Any Hebrew who had Sunday School remembered 2 Kings 1:8 where the messengers of King Ahaziah come and tell him about a man of God, *“He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.”* The king said, *“That was Elijah the Tishbite.”* Elijah's message was one of repentance and turning to the LORD. So was John's.

*“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”* John's message struck home. The Holy Spirit did his work in those hearts. The people knew they could not dismiss their sins or avoid the truth that they deserved God's wrath. They recognized their complete corruption and desperate need for rescue. They confessed their sins. John baptized them. There were many ceremonial washings in the Old Testament signifying purification and ceremonial cleanness. But this was something more. Mark and Luke tell us it was a baptism of repentance *“for the forgiveness of sins.”* Jesus himself will ask the chief priests and elders of the people, *“I will ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”* (Matthew 21:24-25a). John and Jesus' work, ministry and power came from the same place – God. God had worked repentance through John's message. The people came for forgiveness. On the banks of the Jordan they received it. Their hearts were prepared. They had found **A Kingdom Worth Waiting For.**

But not everyone wanted this kingdom. *“And seeing 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 coming wrath?”* They had all the outward markings of religiosity, BUT the Sadducees rejected the resurrection and much of the Scriptures. The Pharisees found righteousness in their outward performance of the law and bending God's Word to fit their falsehoods. Jesus

spoke the same, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean”* (Matthew 23:25-26). It’s not just what is seen on the outside that matters. Where is your heart?

Do we claim Christ, but live like bowls only washed on the outside? Do we confess Christ only when it’s convenient? Is worship at God’s house mostly a box to be checked on our “livin’ right” list of good deeds, rather than Jesus’ invite to come and meet with him, to receive his Word and Sacraments, his love and find rest for our souls? Or do we see his house and Word as “only when it’s convenient,” letting it plummet down the priority ladder. Have we confessed Christ, but then adopted popular revisions of the sixth commandment where marriage is merely an option or an after the fact frivolity whenever we get to it instead of before we partake of God’s gift of intimacy? Is marriage some noose or ball and chain instead of one of God’s great gifts to mankind? Single or married, have we rewritten our bibles to say, “you can look as long as you don’t touch” and so we let lust entrap our eyes, our minds and hearts with what the world calls entertainment or modern business? Do we suffer alone in addiction instead of crying out for help? Do we confess Christ and promise to love our neighbor, but immediately run them down behind their backs for the slightest offense against us or people we love? Do we overindulge in God’s gifts of alcohol or fermented drink or constantly push the line farther and farther? Do we truly love God and care for our neighbor, or is it really just all about us? What would our daily planner tell others? What would our checkbook or credit card statement say to God? Do we place our trust, comfort and happiness in investing in our future and our pleasure instead of putting our trust in Christ alone? People who feel no need of forgiveness and want to remain vipers and snakes will not be helped by going out to the Jordan to improve their looks with the crowd. Then John’s message, Jesus’ message, God’s gift of baptism is trampled on like snakes should be.

John said, *“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”* What family you come from or lineage you claim can be a blessing, but it is not your ticket into heaven. Plenty of Jews have gone to hell because they have rejected the Savior. Plenty of people who have called themselves Christians, but rejected Christ have gone to hell too.

*“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one more powerful 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 the threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* As John looks at those who reject the Savior, all he sees is an ax leaning up against a dead tree just waiting for the woodsman to return from his lunch break. He sees the pile of grain ready for threshing and the farmer will throw it up into the air. And all the useless dead, unworthy parts of that plant will blow into a pile on the backstop fit only for the fire. The wheat alone will fall to the ground and be gathered safely into the barn. What is our only hope, dear Christian?

John shows us: the one so *great* that John the Baptist, the best of humankind, was not worthy to even hold his dirty sandals. He is *so great* that *he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. And he has. Jesus said to his disciples before his ascension, *“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 1:5). And God sent them out on Pentecost to share this good news with the world, with you and me. We are baptized with Jesus’ baptism – *“in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). God has claimed us, washed us clean of our sins, worked true repentance in our hearts so that we see what has happened and why we can say that we are forgiven and that we are free, why we live for him.

For us, Jesus took the place of the dead trees that we were, and his Father cut him down on the cross of Calvary and had him suffer the fire of hell instead of us. Jesus weighted us with his works love, charity and honoring God so we dropped to the floor of the thresher’s grain bin, and he became the chaff. So we are let live, cultivated and pruned and fed with the Gospel of full and free forgiveness. He rose to prove our rescue and that things are different for us. He works daily repentance in us to turn from sin and to trust in our Savior and strengthened by him to say “no” to temptation and let our lives match our confession of Christ. We are not vipers and snakes, but children of God.

So, are you ready? I don’t think we need to ask Emily Post. John the Baptist and our Savior Jesus have made us ready, excited and accepted. So live dear Christian and serve. Our Savior brings **A Kingdom Worth Waiting For**. Amen.