

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

It's a good thing John the Baptist isn't around today. He wouldn't be too successful as a pastor in a church. After all, he has a beard, dresses differently than everyone else in the world, shouts at people, calls leaders names like "vipers," and tries to keep people—including the leaders—accountable to what God demands and expects from His children. He might have gotten a call initially, but without a doubt, he'd be forced out of the church one way or another. And, in actuality, he was, by being jailed and then beheaded, but that is a story for another time this lectionary year. Happy Advent!

Although we are still in our Advent journey, the lectionary advances us some thirty years into the future, at the time of the ministry of John the Baptist—the cousin of Jesus—and John's preaching and baptizing in the land.

John is in the prime of his ministry, wandering through the desert and coming to the edge of Jerusalem, but not into it, in order to bring a message of repentance and change of life to God's Chosen People. Baptism, as you might recall, is a ritual washing found in scores of traditions, not just Christianity. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have a ritual bath for those Gentiles who converted to the faith, as well as part of the purification process before holy days and at other times. Followers of Islam regularly wash their feet as part of a ritual of cleansing and preparation, especially before daily prayer. Ritual washing is also found in countless other traditions, sacred and secular.

For John the Baptist, the call to the people to a ritual bath, or baptism, for repentance of one's sins was a critical step in the preparation of the world for the coming of the Greater One, Jesus of Nazareth. John's mission was to prepare the people to receive their promised Messiah, the Anointed One of God. John's assignment was not to save people, but to get them to save themselves, if you will, by changing their ways and returning to God and God's teachings. If the people would have only listened....

Some of the people did listen to John, and they flocked out of Jerusalem and into the countryside to hear him preach, confess their sins, and be baptized—washed clean—as a sign of their repentance. These men and women heard John’s message and truly desired to change their lives for the better. What became of them, we’ll never know of course. Undoubtedly some became disciples of John, and others would come to follow Jesus. Others, perhaps, simply went back to life as normal when they didn’t see the powerful savior on a white horse ride into Jerusalem to oust the Romans and their puppet government.

There were others, however, who came out of curiosity. What was this character up to in the wilderness? He certainly was getting folks all excited about something or someone. Among these were both the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom John proceeds to confront and call them names. At the same time, John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees to account, and demands that they, of all the people, be the ones to live lives of repentance, setting an example for the community they are called to serve.

John’s words are a message to us today as well. We have benefited from the life-giving baptism of the Holy Spirit, the sign of our adoption by God as His children, and that we are assured God’s love and grace. We are also reminded that the church—the Body of Christ gathered on earth—is a place filled with saints and sinners, faithful and unfaithful. We are all sinners before God, no matter what we do. Sin is so much a part of us that it cannot be removed by our own motivation or desire. At the same time, having been baptized and received as God’s children and coheirs with Christ, we are also saved from sin, death, the devil, and eternal separation from God. As Luther so aptly describes, we are *simil iustus et peccator*, or simultaneously saved and sinner.

What are we to make of all this, and especially John’s claim that there will be a winnowing of the wheat at the final judgment, where some will be saved and others doomed to a fire that will never be extinguished?

We can’t simply ignore these statements of John which our gospel writer Matthew has included here for his Jewish audience. One reason we cannot overlook them is that the image many of us have of a place like hell *isn’t* the image that the first

century Jewish man or woman would have of hell—Gehenna, as they called it. This image of a pitchfork tossing the wheat into the air, allowing the grain to fall and the unusable chaff to be blown away, to be later collected and burned, was a common sight, but the idea of a fire-and-brimstone place that would make the furnace of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego look like the North Pole was something foreign to most Jews of the time. But Matthew, writing to a largely Jewish Christian audience, was trying to make it clear that there would be a time of judgment when Christ returned. Indeed, even in our creeds we confess that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Judgment is that under which we all live each and every day of our lives, from the moment of our birth—no, moment of conception—to our last earthly breath. Judgment comes from many sources, but the reality is, my dear friends, that the only judgment that matters—truly matters—is that of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes again as promised to be our King and Judge.

Be baptized and be saved, we have been taught, so what are we to think about this judgment thing? Even the Reformers had to address the issue in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, when they were taken to task for writing that the “church was the community of saints,” and the Roman Catholic writers of the Confutation said, “But what about the sinners in the church, too?” Even the Reformers—Phillip Melanchthon in particular, as the writer of the Apology, declared that even though we are baptized and partake of the rite, or sacrament, of penance and absolution, we are called to live lives worthy of that repentance and that, yes indeed, Christ will come again, as promised, to judge the living and the dead as to their faithfulness.

What a bummer! We are baptized, and by our baptism we are saved, and we make regular confession of our sins and hear the words of absolution, and we *still* have to worry if we have done enough to show Christ at the Judgment Day that we have been faithful? Fat chance of making that happen.

But fear not, dear friends, for we have been saved by our baptism into Christ's own death and resurrection, and we have been promised by no less authority than the Son of God himself that we will be saved and with him in Paradise. Live good lives, yes. Receive the Sacraments regularly, yes. Strive to live a life worthy of the salvation we have received, yes again. Worry that we haven't done enough to earn God's love, never, not in a million years, not in an eternity. For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it.

This is the Good News. Share it with those who haven't heard it.