

Matthew 3:1-12

At this time of the year there is a lot of crying going on. In a few weeks we will hear the cries of the newborn Baby lying in a manger. Today we hear the cries of John the Baptist; the cry to “Repent!” Because of this cry, God wants to hear us crying in sorrow over our sins. He wants us to heed the cry of repentance and mourn the wicked lives we have led.

Most people, however, will not cry until it is too late. They refuse to cry in sorrow over their sins now, and so they will cry with sorrow for all eternity.

For most, the weeks before Christmas are a time to brighten up their homes with lights and decorations, but to do nothing with their hearts. These weeks are a time to listen to the sound of sleigh bells, carols, and Christmas wish lists, but to ignore the sound of the preacher crying in the desert. For most, these weeks are a time to attend Christmas parties and family gatherings, but not a time to attend worship services in God’s House.

If you and I in the church do as the world does, then we will be lost. The world does not repent. It makes excuses for its behavior, but does not repent. It blames others for everything that is wrong, but does not repent. “The world is perishing,” writes the Apostle...but God has called you in your baptism out of the world. He has called you to a life of repentance; a life lived not for yourself, but for the Baby who was born in a manger for you. And so we are gathered here today to listen to the cries of the preacher—the cry of John calling us to repent. And we are here today so that in hearing God’s prophet cry out to us, God would bring us to tears of sorrow over our sinful lives.

“Repent!” cried John, and all Judea was coming out to listen—people just like you and me. They were coming from Defiance, and Marthasville, and Washington, from Augusta, and all the surrounding region. They were coming out to hear the voice of God’s messenger. Some were coming from broken homes, others from abusive homes, and alcoholic homes, and homes full of debt. Some who were coming out were widows, others were widowers; still others were parents who had lost a child in death.

They were coming out to hear God’s prophet just as you have come to the House of God today...and yet the strange thing about it is that they came even though they didn’t want to come. No one likes to repent. No one wants to hear the harsh accusations of the Law. No one wants to be told that they must change their behavior. And yet the people came out to John in the Jordan just as you have come out today.

Repent? We don’t like that word. I’m comfortable with how I am...I don’t want to repent. I’m content with my behavior...I don’t want to repent. If repenting means more time for God each week and less time for me, then I don’t want to repent. If repenting means more money for God and less money for me, then I don’t want to repent. If it means cutting down on my cussing, and drinking, and lusting; if it means making changes in my life, then I don’t want to repent. Your sinful flesh, and mine, hates to repent. We don’t want to hear God’s preacher. We don’t want to mourn over our sins. We don’t want to live a life of repentance.

And so why are we here? Why have we come out of our homes this day to listen to the voice of one crying in the desert? For the same reason all Judea was coming out to listen to John—because God was drawing them. Repentance is not our action...it is God’s action in

us. The people did not come from Jerusalem, and Bethany, and Jericho, and Bethlehem of their own free will. God drew them out to hear His preacher, John. And that is why you and I are here today. “No one comes to Me,” says our Lord, “Unless the Father draws him.” Even though we don’t like the harsh voice of the Law, God wants us to hear it, and so He has drawn you here today. Even though our sinful flesh doesn’t want to stop sinning, God has drawn you to the voice of His preacher, John, to put our sinful flesh to death.

If you are uncomfortable as you sit in the pew, then know that God is having His way within you. If you are lamenting your sinful behavior, then know that this is God’s work in you. If you show the fruits of repentance in your life this week, it is not to your credit or mine; it is God bearing fruit in you and through you. But there were those in John’s day who showed no such fruits. They had no love for God and His Word. They had no use for repentance. “You brood of vipers!” John called them. God’s warning was clear. “Unless you repent,” John cried, “You will be cut down and thrown into the fire!”

To reject what John was preaching was to reject God Himself...and so with us today. Unless you and I repent of our sins, we will perish. And that is why God, out of mercy, has drawn you and keeps drawing you to where His voice is being proclaimed. The name John means “God has been gracious.” And this is why God sent John to His people then and to us today—because God is gracious. He wants all “to repent and to come to a knowledge of the Truth.” He wants you and I to repent and bear fruits of repentance in our lives.

And the remarkable thing is that when God leads us to repentance; when He draws us to hear the cry of His preacher, He allows us to hear another voice crying off in the distance—it is the voice of Jesus from the cross. His voice is crying out for you. “Father,” He cries, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” “My God!” He cries, “Why have you forsaken Me!” “It is finished!” “Father,” He cries, “Into Your hands I commit My spirit.”

John cried and the people came out to the Jordan confessing their sins, and he baptized them in the waters. And to those waters God has drawn you in your baptism. And the amazing thing is that once we’re in those waters, the sounds of the cross come to our ears. If you’ve ever been in a swimming pool, you know that under water sounds travel ever so clearly. Under water our ears can hear sounds from far away. And so you, the baptized children of God, because you now live under the waters of Holy Baptism, you hear the sound of Jesus’ voice crying out for you. John’s voice led you to those waters, but in those waters Jesus’ voice is ever so strong and clear: My cross is for you, He cries; I died for you there. My Father in heaven has declared you forgiven of all your sins. I was forsaken by My Father in your place; I suffered rejection; I suffered hell, so that you now are accepted by My Father and have a place in heaven. It is finished...all is finished for you, He cries; I did everything to win your salvation.

Do you hear the sound of Jesus’ voice crying in the waters of your baptism? John cries out to you in the desert, but Jesus from the cross, cries out for you. It is a cry of suffering, but also a cry of pure mercy. He goes to the cross of His own free will. Out of love for you He is cut down with the axe and thrown into the fire in your place. Out of pure grace He is bitten by the Viper for you. He does nothing for Himself. He does everything for you.

And that is why God has drawn you here today...to listen to the voice of John, yes, but especially to hear the voice of Jesus; the voice of your Savior, for His words “are Spirit and Life.” His words cry out for you from the cross, and they are given to you here in His House of Forgiveness. There is no sweeter cry than the voice of Jesus. His cry of suffering means that you will never endure His torment. His cry of rejection means that He will never forsake you. His cries in death are eternal life for you. Because Jesus cried out for you from the cross you will never know the cries of those in eternal sorrow. Because Jesus cries out for you now with His Word of Pardon and Peace—that Word coming into your ears—you are able to live this week showing in your life the fruits of repentance, for it is your Lord Himself who goes out with you and lives in you.

Jesus’ cry is for you, friend. No matter why you are here, His cry is for you. No matter what your sinful past is like, His cry is for you. “Forgiveness,” He cries, “Pardon, peace, and life.” And so you, friend, depart in peace...you are forgiven. Amen.