

Matthew 3:1-12

It's automatic. When a State Patrol car sits in the median, everyone on the interstate slows down. Few would be so foolish as to speed by the officer with a radar gun in his hand...unless the driver was not paying attention. This is how it plays out during the season of Advent. God's patrol officer, John the Baptist, stands at the intersection of our lives, not with a radar gun in his hand, but with God's Law in his mouth, and he cries out, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

And we do. At least on the surface. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas we tend to soften our words even toward those we despise. We shop for Christmas gifts even for those relatives we don't much care for. In the season of Advent we put on a happier face than we do the other times of the year. Outwardly we show signs of repentance. And not just us. Everyone for the most part does this. Everyone slows down. Very few pay no attention to the Patrol Officer with his radar gun.

But you know what happens when drivers are well past the patrol car. They speed up again. They go as fast, or faster than they were going before they slowed down. This reveals what is in the heart. Drivers slow down not because they want to do the right thing--and the patrol car is a reminder to them that they are breaking the law and need to change the way they are driving. No, they slow down so they don't get caught and face the penalty of a speeding ticket.

This is the way the world repents. It's superficial. It's not genuine. The older brother says, "I'm sorry," to his sister not because he is truly sorry that he pushed her down, but because mom makes him say it. The criminal is sorry he stole the money not because his heart is grieved and contrite, but because he got caught. The divorced couple are nice to each other not because they know they equally share in wrong-doing and have forgiven each other, but for the sake of the children. The radar gun brings about a superficial peace to our society. We are kinder to each other because of it. But this type of outward repentance is not what God requires.

When the Pharisees and Sadducees came, John called them out: "*You brood of vipers!*" he cried, "*Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.*" John knew that once they left, they would continue in their sinful ways. They had done this with every prophet God had sent to them. Could those same words be spoken to us? ("*You brood of vipers!*") Absolutely, yes! A viper is a poisonous snake. What makes it a viper is the poison within it. Sin is the poison within all of us. The Serpent bit our first parents in the Garden, and as a result they, and all their children, became infected with poison.

Because sin is a poison in us, we act like our first parents did when they were bitten. They refused to repent. When God came to them, they hid. And when God asked them what they had done, they blamed another. That's what sin's poison does in us. It blinds us to our need for repentance. We live pretty much with ourselves as lord of our life six days a week, and on Sunday we slow down for the Patrol Officer just until we get back in the car to head home.

Sin's poison in us causes us to have the wrong idea of what repentance is. We like to see it as our work. It's what we do to make things right between God and us. But that's a lie. It's Satan's lie. Repentance is not our action. It's God's action within us. "*Create in me a clean heart, O God,*" we say with David. It was God who brought David to sorrow over his sin. It was God who caused Peter to weep bitterly when he denied his Lord. And it's God, and God alone, who gives us a contrite heart when His Law shows us the enormity of our sin. Repentance is a gift. A gift of God. It is not within us to repent. Adam and Eve could not do it. God had to act. He had to bring them to repent of their sin, not by forcing them with a strong arm, but by telling them that a Savior would come, born of woman,

and He would hold out His arms to bear the guilt of their sin. That's why John doesn't just cry, "Repent!" He cries, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" "The One born of woman is following me, and *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*"

When you were baptized, God gave you the gift of a repentant heart. You renounced the devil and his poison. You were blessed with new life in Jesus. In baptism you became dead to sin and alive in Christ. And this was not just for the day you were baptized. This is who you are every day. Repentance is the lifelong walk of the Christian. It must be lifelong because the poison of sin remains in us until we die. But Jesus is here with the antidote. His words are spirit and are life. And His flesh and blood protects you from sin's poison. Jesus is like a man who was bitten by a snake and survived, and now his blood is the antidote for everyone else who is bitten. Jesus drank the cup, the bitter cup of poison, and He died and then rose from death, and so "*His blood cleanses us from all sin.*" Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament are medicine for your soul so that sin's poison cannot kill you eternally in the unquenchable fire of hell.

Repentance is not something you do on Sunday morning. You do not come to church, slow down for the Patrol Officer, repent of your sin, and then speed back to your real life out there. As a Christian baptized into Christ, you live a life of repentance seven days a week. Jesus lives within you not just here in church, but every day. He lives in you to fight against the poison of sin. He lives in you, His baptized child, to bless you and keep you. And because you are like me, I know that you struggle each day with sin's poison. You resist Jesus' lordship, wanting to be lord of your own life. You resist confessing your sin. You resist living the repentant life.

That's why Jesus leads you here to His House--to His words of life, to His table of mercy. He is not here to force you to slow down. He is here to forgive you. And He does. You are forgiven for resisting Him. You are forgiven for giving in to sin's poison. Jesus does not strong-arm you here so that you obey Him. He opens His arms here and shows you His wounds, and He gives you the blood that comes from those wounds.

When you leave here today, Jesus goes with you...not to follow you like a Sheriff down the interstate. He goes with you, in you and for you, because He loves you, because He guards you from the evil one. He goes with you with all His mercy and forgiveness so that you are strengthened to live the repentant life of a Christian, living in hope, and joy, and peace with God because of Jesus. Amen.