

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Today marks the halfway point in the season of Advent. Advent began fourteen days ago. Fourteen days from now will be Christmas. We are in the middle, in the thick of it, so to speak. If Advent was a long, dark night, today we would be in the deepest, darkest part of that night. Which is why we light the pink candle today. For us Advent is not that long--only four weeks. But for God's people in the Old Testament it was thousands of years. That's why God sent His prophets to them again and again to remind them that Christmas was coming. In the midst of their long, dark winter there was hope, for the Light would come.

Today the pink candle on our Advent wreath is lit signifying the brighter hope of believers who look for that Christmas Light. Because even in four short weeks troubles can quickly come to darken our world. Our sins and guilt can snuff out the Light of promise even for people living in and around the little town of Augusta.

We light the candles on our Advent wreath only as a reminder. We do not need these candles lit so that we can see. If they weren't lit, you could still read every word in your hymnal. That's the thing about light...it's only appreciated when someone is in the dark. And since Jesus is the Light of hope, of promise, not everyone appreciates Him.

Perhaps that is partly why John the Baptist preached out in the wilderness. There was water there for baptizing, but out beyond the Jordan he was far away from the city lights. In fact, out where John was there were no creature comforts at all. He roughed it day and night, and so did everyone who came out to him. Did you ever give thought to this?...that John was the only prophet who did not go to the people; the people came to him. Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah...every prophet was sent by God to His people. They went to where the people were and there they set up shop. But John set up shop out in the desert and all the people came out to him there.

This is because repentance can only take place out in the desert. When Isaiah spoke about John, he did not say, "The voice of one crying *in the market place*," or "The voice of one crying *in the king's palace*." He said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness. To prepare the way of the Lord; to repent of a sinful life, one must go out to the wilderness. And they did. One after another, they left the comforts of their homes and trekked out to the desert where John was preaching, and there in the wilderness they received "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

So what are we doing in here? We're not out in the wilderness. We're seated in wooden pews which are somewhat comfortable. We're dressed in fine clothing. The building is heated. The lights are on. This place is hardly a desert. We even have a bathroom nearby and plenty of water in the fountain downstairs. Friends, it is true that we can only repent out in the desert, but this does not mean that we must physically travel out to a deserted place as the people did in John's day. It means that our hearts must become a wilderness. Our hearts must become deserted wastelands if you and I are going to repent of our sins and thus prepare the way for Christ to enter in.

The thief on the cross, by way of example, did not go out to the wilderness until he was dying next to Jesus. All his life his heart was full--full of everything but repentance. He was full of himself, full of selfish thoughts, full of excuses for his way of living. He never did go out to the desert to repent. All his life he had no use for Christ. Since he did not believe he lived in darkness, he had no use for the Light. Until he was dying. Then, and only then did his heart become a desert. Now he saw what a waste his life had been. Now his heart became empty. No longer did he cling to false hopes. No

longer was his heart full of excuses. Once full of himself, now he became a beggar. "Jesus, remember me," he cried with tears of repentance. He who had lived his whole life in the darkness of sin, but refused to admit it, now, by the grace of God, saw it for the first time. And with the darkness of death closing in around him, the light of Christ beside him became the one thing that he now appreciated. And that Light was, for him, the Light of promise. "Today," the Light said, "You will be with Me in Paradise."

Friends, every one of us needs to go out to the desert, and that happens right here and now as God exposes the darkness within our hearts; as He shines His light of truth in all the dark crevices where we keep our hidden sins and our false hopes. We cannot be full of ourselves if we want Jesus to come and live within us. We cannot hold on to our sinful pride if we want to hold on to our Savior. Your heart, and mine, must become barren wastelands. There can be no excuses found there; no excuses for our sinful behavior. There can be no confidence in ourselves found there. Nothing there which makes us proud of who we are; nothing to hold up to God and say, "Look at what I've done in my life!" We must be beggars before God. Beggars who cry for mercy because we have nothing within us of which we can boast. Beggars who cry out of darkness, the darkness of our sins and death, who know that nothing good dwells within us, within our flesh.

And it is to beggars such as you, who cry out in the wilderness for mercy, that I say with joy, "Look at the pink candle!" You may be in darkness, but Christ is coming. And look at your baptism and at the Sacrament on the altar, for that Light is even now here for you. As He spoke to a man dying as a beggar on a cross, so He speaks to you today: 'You, too, will be with Me in Paradise.' Your sins are all forgiven. Your punishment has been taken away and borne by Him who died for you. Now you live in a wilderness, but you shall live in the rich splendor of heaven. And even now God fills you with His riches, for He Himself comes to live within you, within your barren heart so that you are filled with joy. Even now, being baptized into Christ, He fills you with hope, for every one of His promises is for you.

It is good that we are here today; here on this Sunday in Advent. The world does not pause to consider what Advent means. It jumps from Thanksgiving to Christmas. There is no Advent in the world. There is no preparing for the Christ to come and enter in. Only the preparing of cookies. Only the buying and wrapping of gifts, and putting up trees and decorations. The world has no desert, no place to repent.

But in the church...every Sunday it is a desert in here. Every week God prepares your hearts by the preaching of His Law. And every week Jesus comes to hearts like yours who rejoice, not in yourselves, but in the gifts He brings. It is no accident that you are here. God has drawn you here because every gift He has is for you. The gifts under your tree cannot ever compare to the gifts He gives. His gifts are eternal. His gifts are yours because of the cross where Jesus died for you.

There is a thief in heaven today who is rejoicing that God included him when handing out His gifts--the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. And you, no matter who you are, no matter how dark with sin your life has been, no matter how much of a barren wasteland you are, right now these same gifts are yours--yours in Jesus and yours forever. Amen.