

St. Luke begins our Gospel reading with names; the names of men who are recorded in the history books. This is no fairy tale; no story concocted within the mind of St. Luke. This is historical fact. Luke is an historian of the first rank. He anchors his Gospel account with factual names, dates, and events.

And so, we see here Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, the Herods, the high priests: Annas and Caiaphas. These rulers represent the world into which John comes. And already we can tell that this son of Zechariah, who is to “*prepare the way of the Lord,*” will have his hands full. None of these men cozy up to John. Not one of these rulers welcomes John and what he has come to proclaim. The tetrarch of Galilee, that Herod, would even have John arrested and eventually beheaded.

But God sends His prophet anyway. He sends John into a world that needs to hear what God has to say. A world just like our world today. But who’s listening? Well, you are here, aren’t you? You have ears. You are listening.

In our text, so are the crowds, and so are the tax collectors, and so are the soldiers. These all listen to what John is saying. They do not shrug their shoulders at him. They do not pass him off as a looney tune out in the desert. They hear John say, “*Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,*” and they ask: “What fruits? *What shall we do?*”

This is good. Something is happening here. The Holy Spirit is working. He is turning them to take notice of John, to consider his words; to say to themselves: “This man is speaking to me.”

So then, does God’s prophet have your attention as well? You have heard John’s words of repentance many times in your life. How many times can we hear the same thing before we start to tune it out? Before we really don’t listen anymore? “John the Baptist? Ah yes, each year in December I hear his voice. He’s not Santa Claus. Nor is he Jesus. He’s John. Plain, simple John. He never changes his tune. He keeps telling me to repent. Yeah, I’ve been there, done that. I think I’ll turn my attention away from John to some nice Christmas music.”

John isn’t Christmas. He’s Advent. And who really likes Advent? Not even us in the Church. We tolerate Advent. We put up Christmas stuff in Advent because we want to focus on Christmas, and not so much on Advent.

But if we do that, then we are not really listening to what God has to say to us through His Advent preacher. John did not preach a baptism of forgiveness for repentance; he proclaimed “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” There is order here. God’s order. Repentance for forgiveness. Advent, then Christmas. John preparing the way for Jesus. And what John has to say, now in Advent, is that we must change.

Ah, now there’s a word with which we struggle. “Change? But I don’t like change. I want others to change, but not me. I can see clearly how other people need to change. But as for me, I’m good just the way I am.”

And yet, repentance involves changing; changing our ways. Which Commandment do you and I struggle with the most? The Third? Putting other things in the way of God's Word and Sacraments on Sundays? The Sixth? Allowing sexual lust to have a place in our heart? The Eighth? Speaking in ways that hurt others? Gossiping and listening to gossip? We all struggle with the First Commandment. Daily we fail to keep it. We all must change. What in your life needs to be changed? It is the person who says, "Nothing," who is unwilling to repent.

The crowds ask John what changes they must make. So do the tax collectors. So do the soldiers. All these are receptive to John. Do all these change overnight? Surely not. But something is happening within them. A willingness to repent is there. And this willingness, along with any changes in them, and in us, is all the work of the Holy Spirit alone. When a sinner repents, to God alone be the glory.

And repentance is proclaimed by John *for the forgiveness of sins*. When sinners listen to John, they are ready for Jesus. And in Jesus we have the forgiveness of our sins.

And that, my friends, is worth going through Advent for. Jesus went through much more than Advent to be, for us, forgiveness, life, and salvation. He went into hell and back. He came on Christmas to be nailed to a cross on Good Friday. And on that cross Jesus shed His blood for the forgiveness of your sins and mine.

Now, I want to point you to what God says through another prophet. A prophet who came four centuries before John. Malachi, in our first reading today. Through Malachi, God says this: "*I the Lord do not change...therefore, you are not consumed.*"

We must change, but God must not, and He will not. His mercy does not waver back and forth. His grace is constant. And the forgiveness of sins that Jesus purchased by His blood will always, always be, for you, life and salvation. God, simply put, will never change His mind. What your Savior, Jesus, has done for you will stand forever.

And even more, what Jesus did for you is yours forever in your baptism. You cannot be un-baptized. And thus, God can never take away what your baptism into Christ gives you – a place with Jesus forever because your sins are forgiven. And here, through Malachi, is God's proof: "*I the Lord do not change.*"

Just like St. Luke's Gospel, these words of God are recorded fact. They are anchored with the nails driven into Jesus' hands and feet, sealed forever with His blood. Amen.