

Today the Church commemorates St. Ambrose of Milan. Remember that this year we are Celebrating the Saints. Grab a devotional book downstairs if you haven't already. We are learning a bit of the history of the church. And we are following in the footsteps of faith of the saints who have come before us.

Ambrose was the one who first instructed Augustine in the faith. But we probably know him best as a hymn writer. Tradition says that he may have co-written the *Te Deum* with Augustine. We find the *Te Deum* in the order of Matins—and reflected in the hymn *We Praise You and Acknowledge You, O God*.

And Ambrose did write our closing hymn today—a hymn that will get our special attention in this Advent season—*Savior of the Nations, Come*. Remember that all the seasons, feasts, festivals, and commemorations are found in the front of your hymnal and in our devotional book.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading from Matthew 3. The text itself is a sermon from John the Baptist. And he doesn't mince words. Listen to what he says, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance...Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...His winnowing fork is in His hand...and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist. His name does not refer to a denomination. You probably know that. John the Baptist was not a Baptist. Not in name or in his theology. Sometimes he gets called John the Baptizer. This might be a better way to think about him. He baptizes in the wilderness—a baptism for repentance and forgiveness. And at Jesus' command, John baptizes Jesus Himself.

In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, he is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. He is the forerunner. He is Elijah that was to come. He is the greatest of the prophets. And we all know his importance to the Christmas story. It is his miraculous birth that heralds the birth of Jesus Christ. He is even filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb of his mother Elizabeth.

The Angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah—John's father—the role that John will play. He says, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

But does John the Baptist *the man* live up to the prophecies? He lives alone in the desert. He has a Nazarite vow given to him in the womb. He is dressed like a monk. He looks like the Prophet Elijah. In Christian art—when he still has his head—he looks like a wild man with wild hair.

Imagine listening to him every Sunday. His sermon is like an axe. And all he leaves of his hearers is a stump. He is direct. He is confrontational. He attacks people with his sermons—important people—like the Herodian family. He overthrows the status quo. He disrupts our quiet holiday season. Is this really the one who prepares the way of the Lord?

And perhaps this is our reaction to this reading. Talking about the message of John the Baptist doesn't get us ready for Christmas. It misses the point of Advent—or at least we think it does. This isn't warm and cozy. This isn't glad tidings of the King of Kings.

But this is the way of things in the Church. This is how we prepare for the coming Christ. The preaching of John the Baptist reveals the true Christmas spirit. And frankly, all Christian preachers are to be like John.

Now, of course, we don't mean his appearance—his residence in the wilderness—or his diet. But John does something that all faithful prophets and preachers must do. God demands it. Just read any of the Old Testament Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos.

John the Baptists confronts sinners in their sin. Sin offends God. It destroys people. It is not something to ignore or cover-up. And without this type of preaching, there is no Advent. No Gospel. No forgiveness. No Christ. No Christmas.

John calls his hearers to repent of their sins. And this kind of preaching lays bare human failure and the human need for Christ. We are sinners. And deep down inside we know it.

And this truth is fundamental to the Christmas story. In fact, if we rightly understand who we are, after we affirm that God exists, the next thing we need to say is that we have utterly failed Him. We have failed one another. We are infected with this stuff.

Sin includes original sin—that our first parents passed onto us. And it includes actual sin—ways we have disobeyed God's law. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. This is why Jesus came. This is the purpose of the incarnation. Jesus took on a human nature to address the curse and the damage that sin has caused. Sin is what brings the cross. And the cross is our message and our great hope!

And so, the preaching we need must acknowledge human sin. It must acknowledge our sin. We are not brought into the blessings of God's royal rule in Christ—nor are we prepared to be gathered to God on the last day—by Christian preachers glossing over the problem of sin. Or by Christian preachers tickling our ears and giving us whatever we want to hear.

So, how do we respond? What do we do with the preaching of John the Baptist and his ilk? When the preacher confronts sin, and calls us to turn away from sin, to even hate our sin, how will we respond? When he proclaims, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand," what goes through our heads?

Now we could just get really irritated with the man. This happens in the days of John. One of his hearers will have his head cut off. And certainly, we have all known preachers that were just offensive for the sake of being offensive. John the Baptist is not an excuse for preachers to be rude. But don't dismiss God's truth, even when it comes through the mouth of a fundamentally flawed man.

But, there is a deeper reaction that many of us have when we hear about the problem of human sin. Often, our thoughts go immediately to *them*. And you know who *they* are. They are the sinners. We instantly think about who needs to hear John the Baptist's preaching.

In the days of Jesus, they were the tax collectors and the prostitutes. They were the lepers and the outcasts. Today, they are the drug dealers and the murderers and anyone who

might live in the wrong part of town. It's easy to talk about sin when it is the sin of someone else.

This seems to be what is going on with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in our reading. They are aware of the sins of the people—of those being baptized for the repentance of sins in the Jordan River that day. They are aware of the sins of the nations, the Gentiles, the outsiders, but clearly, not of their own.

And that really is the point of the surprising language that John the Baptist uses. And if this confrontational language against the Pharisees and Sadducees surprises us—just read what Jesus says in Matthew 23. He is much more harsh—and thorough.

Jesus is not meek and mild here, He is bold. He is brash. He puts His life at risk. Repentance is just that important—for these ancient Jewish religious people—and for us. John and Jesus are willing to risk everything—because their risks bring about repentance—and repentance brings about eternal rewards. As we know, John will die at Herod's command. Jesus' words lead quite quickly to the cross. But as we discussed a few weeks ago—that was the plan.

So today, let's allow this to hit a little closer to home. Today, let's stand with the Pharisees and Sadducees and hear John's confrontation. But let's go beyond their reaction and let's hear the truth for what it is. Let's apply it to ourselves. We come to the waters of Baptism with the same needs as these men. And like them, it is remarkably easy to take our sins lightly.

And it is easy to simply hide our sinful condition from our Church family. We deal with our sins by being on our most moral behavior on Sundays. We put on our Sunday best. We clean up our language. We put some money in the plate. We revel in the number of years we have spent in the pew. And now God is placated for the week. We can return to our hidden sins. And no one at Church even needs to know.

And the Church has played into this hypocrisy. We don't permit people to be sinners. We expect everyone to conceal his sin from the Church. We expect our members to wear masks on Sunday to hide our true selves. Sin is too messy to deal with in public. So, we ask our members to act as holy as possible.

And this works—for the moment—because sin wants to remain hidden. Sin desires to remain alone. It hates the light. Yet, the more isolated we are, the more destructive sin becomes. And the more deeply we involve ourselves in sin, the more disastrous the consequences. Sin brings God's wrath. Sin wrecks our lives—and the lives of others. That is John the Baptist's point.

The fact is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were sinners, just like the rest of the people at the banks of the Jordan. And even all of us who have been in this Church for years—we are sinners too. We need to confess this. This is what true repentance is all about.

The good news? Jesus came for sinners. It was Jesus who sat down at the table with tax collectors and sinners. It was Jesus who suffered the scandalous, public death of a sinner in our stead. He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as he was numbered with the criminals. It is Jesus who comes to us now—joining sinners at the table once again.

Jesus doesn't want you to pretend to be moral once a week, that's what the Pharisees and Sadducees did. He wants you to repent of your sins—put that sin to death—and find true righteousness in Him. He wants you to rely on His life, not yours. He wants you to trust in His holiness, not your own.

Advent is penitential. We walk into these holy days in faith and repentance. The fruit of repentance is what prepares us for the holy days ahead—and the Last Day when Christ returns to put a final end to sin. Sin ultimately will be thrown into the lake of fire. And Jesus wants us to meet these days in repentance and faith.

Everyone who would be a Christian, must encounter the message of John the Baptist. We need to hear sermons that confront us in our sins and send us running to our Savior. Each of us knows of our own secret sins. We don't need to get amazingly specific today. We'll let you do that in confession. But John would tell us that whatever that sin is—it is not okay. It is not to be ignored. It is not to be hidden. It is not to be treasured.

It is to be chopped out with an axe. It is to be hated and fought and acknowledge and confessed...and absolved and forgiven in the words and life and death and resurrection of Christ. God has atoned for our sins in Jesus Christ—the real sins—we have inherited from Adam—and the sins we have committed. And these are the glad tidings we most need to hear.

It has been 2000 years since John the Baptist walked the earth, but his message remains in all faithful preaching, “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Indeed it is. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*