

Sermon Notes – December 4, 2022
The Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 3: 1-12
Peace Lutheran Church
“A New Beginning Each Day”

Advent is less about preparation for Christmas than preparation for the coming of Christ. And therefore, the gospel texts for the middle weeks of Advent focus on John the Baptist and his preparatory ministry. In Matthew, that ministry is tied especially close to Jesus. In fact, the summary of John’s teaching is verbatim to that of Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt. 3: 2; 4: 17). John’s clothing and references to fire bring memories of Elijah, traditionally the heralding of the day of the Lord. John’s baptism, however, is not a sacrament of prevenient grace; it is a sign that the one baptized has had a change of heart and commits to a life of integrity. John glares particularly at the Pharisees and Sadducees, parties divided on almost every issue except the future opposition to the Christian movement, but warns all his listeners of the wrath of God. As we shall see more clearly next week, John preaches of *metanoia* and purity being essential but insufficient.

The first reading is often chosen to connect with the gospel but, during this season, it sheds its own light on the coming fulfillment of God’s promises. Among those promises in Isaiah is a renewal of the Davidic monarchy, with a truly faithful king. The reign of God will bring about not only peace, even in the natural realm, but also the healing of important dichotomies. Like Psalm 85, Isaiah envisions a time when mercy and justice will not be in conflict, when fairness and preferential options for the poor are both valued. In a nice poetic touch, a root (invisible because it is underground, but the source of a plant’s life and nourishment) will become the flagpole around which not only Israel but all nations will gather.

And with this future of universality, Paul heartily concurs! The second reading continues to instruct us about how to prepare for the

coming, this week by selfless service of the neighbor, following the example of Christ. Paul has just said that, like Jesus, that the “strong ought to put up with the failing of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15: 1). He urges his readers to be instructed by scripture (which for him is the Old Testament) not in general, but in its promises that the Gentiles will be included in the reign of God. This promise of universal reach of the gospel is what encourages us as we await the final coming.