

“Who Can Endure the Day of His Coming?”

In the name of him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we met for worship, we began the penitential season of Advent in which we, the people of God, devote some time and attention to preparing our hearts to receive the King whose coming at Christmas we will soon celebrate. And as we do, we note that his coming is not one of glory and triumph and judgment. No, he comes in humility and weakness. He comes as our brother in human flesh for the specific purpose of taking our weakness and our guilt upon himself in order to save us from our sin. Because this is the case, we see that our preparation for his coming means mostly recognizing our deep-rooted sinfulness and our consequent desperate need for a Savior such as he. And so, with this in mind, last week I called on you to do some honest introspection and critical self-evaluation. I asked you to look into your heart and your present and past actions and attitudes, and to identify what in your life is contrary to what God demands and expects of you. And to assist you with this, I presented a series of probing questions for you to ask yourself in order to help you measure where you stood with respect to three different things; namely, the strength and completeness of your Christian faith, the extent and quality of your love for others, and finally your own personal holiness. For your Advent preparations, such a thorough self-diagnostic examination is an essential place to start.

But it is only a start. You see, the fallen nature being what it is, we all tend to do this kind of self-examination in a superficial and haphazard sort of way. It's painful to be honest with yourself. We don't like it. So, when it comes to this sort of moral housekeeping, we're like a child told that he can't go out to play until he straightens his room. He may put away a few obvious articles that are out of place; but he then crams everything else under the bed or in a closet – just so it's out of sight. Then off he goes to play claiming that the work is done. Chances are that junior is going to have his playtime cut short. He's not going to enjoy it like he hoped. Mom or Dad, whose evaluations of tidiness are likely to be a little more objective, will surely call him back; and then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth while the job is done as it should have been in the first place. And here's the thing: we don't want the joyous Christmas celebrations we hope to have similarly ruined because our spiritual preparations were shallow or half-hearted. To get the full effect, to properly receive our King, we want to make sure that the job of preparation gets done right.

One summer I worked for an outfit that fit homes with rain gutters and downspouts. My job was to go with this other guy to the houses that the main crew would be working on the next day and take off the old gutters. We'd take the removed gutter pieces back to the yard and sort them for scrap: aluminum in one pile, steel in another, and so on. Anyway, one day we were loading up a trailer to turn in for salvage all the aluminum pieces we'd accumulated. I was on the ground handing up sections to my partner who was standing way up on top of the stack on the trailer. As I'm handing him this one piece of gutter, he gave it a yank before I was properly clear of it. Its edge cut across my forearm, laying open an ugly gash from my elbow to my wrist. No arterial bleeding, mind you; but it wasn't the sort of thing you just put a bandage on and forget about. So I wrapped my bloody arm in a T-shirt and drove over to the hospital. It happened that our family physician was on duty. And he had an assistant who had a reputation for being a rather hard and efficient woman. People called her “Nurse Nazi” – though no one dare say it to her face. It was commonly assumed that she learned her bedside manner at a school that specialized in the training of attack dogs. She looked at my arm with a sneer of contempt – the kind that said she had suffered worse cuts while shaving (and I don't mean her legs). She handed me one of those abrasive plastic sponges soaked in Betadine solution and told me to clean up the wound to prepare it for dressing. Well, it hurt, so I was wiping at it rather gingerly; but trying to be thorough. Her eyes filled with malevolent fury. She stormed over, grabbed my wrist, and said, “No, not like that! Do it like this!” And she started scrubbing with what seemed to be enough force to remove every bit of flesh above the level of the bone. Did I mention that it hurt? One thing's for sure: when she was done, that wound was clean. Absolutely sanitized. No germ could possibly have survived her assault.

Now, as tough as sounds to say it, *that's* what we need to help us in our moral housecleaning to prepare for the Lord's coming: someone who is more concerned with getting the job done right than about the pain and discomfort that might be inflicted in the process. We need that outside inspector: someone whose standards of perfection are as flawless as God's own, and who is mercilessly insistent and brutally honest in their application. We need someone with all the tact and sensitivity of a drill sergeant, someone who's going to force us to look under the beds and into the closets of our lives, and make sure that we deal with all that stuff we pretend is not there and that we'd rather not bother with.

And for this very purpose, the Lord gave us John the Baptist. He's the one sent to prepare us properly for the Lord's coming. Where we would dab at our dirty souls with a damp sponge, John lets us have it with a fire hose filled with hydrogen peroxide; and where we would prefer to use a candle to search out the darkness in our hearts, John lights things up as if with a flamethrower. His mission is to shake us out of our spiritual lethargy. He means to leave no stone unturned in his pursuit of moral imperfections and spiritual uncleanness in your life. When he points his finger at us and calls us a "Brood of vipers", that is, the children of the devil, it ought to make you tremble. You should feel the warm draft of hellfire from below and realize that you are teetering on the brink of damnation.

"But wait", someone will say, " John isn't talking to me. No, I'm already repentant. I've been baptized. I've confessed my sins many times since. John's *tirade* is directed against those hardened sinners out there, those people who refuse to repent." Interesting: that's not what today's text says. It says, rather, that John was speaking to those who came to him in repentance and who were baptized by him. He's talking to each of us. He's talking to you. You see how deftly we try to slip out from underneath his sin searching gaze. We want to imagine that since we're already believers in Christ that we're standing on his side over and against "those sinners out there". And so when we hear the specifics of God's Law laid out – like last week when I was asking all those probing questions – instead of using them to scrutinize ourselves, we think, "Oh, that sounds just like so and so. I sure hope he's listening to this" and "Too bad what's-her-name isn't here to hear this. I'll have to send her a copy of the sermon." It's a tactic we use to avoid looking more closely at the messes under our own beds.

Of course, there are other ways to dodge John's verbal assault. A favorite method, especially when an accusation of sin hits a bit too close to home, is the one used by King Herod; that is, to punish the messenger in an effort to silence him. Herod had used his superior wealth and status to woo away the wife of his brother, Philip. She was the very beautiful and equally ambitious Herodias. I suspect that Herod must have liked her name too, since it was the feminine form of his own (though I think that would get a little confusing around the palace). Anyway, John called Herod's very public adultery the scandal that it was, and it didn't make Herod very happy. Though he was not a Jew himself, Herod always tried to make himself popular even with the religious authorities by pretending to act like good and proper Jew. As a matter of fact, he was at that time spending a fortune on a project to give the Jerusalem temple a complete renovation. He guessed correctly that the religious authorities would complain privately about his adultery; but that they wouldn't speak out publicly for fear of losing his patronage. John, on the other hand, had no qualms about it. He spoke God's truth to the situation – he had to. He understood that to do less would be to tell everyone that if you're rich enough, or powerful enough, or if you do a lot of nice things for the church, then your sins can be overlooked.

At first, Herod tried to ignore John; but he was much too loud and popular with the people. Even worse, his wife wanted John silenced. She simply refused to be known as an adulterous woman. It hurt her feelings. It detracted from the pious image she wanted to present. Besides, who was this John to judge her? So, under pressure, Herod put John in prison. In his heart, Herod knew that John was right to point out his sin; but he had his reputation and the peace of his own home to think about. Ironically, it was in order to protect his reputation for keeping a promise that led Herod later to try to silence John for good, thus adding murder to his list of offenses.

The trouble is that John cannot be silenced so simply. I suspect that Herod discovered that in the wee hours of many sleepless nights; and even if he didn't, he hears that accusing voice now echoing though his mind in hell. And though he has been dead for two thousand years, John's voice – really God's voice through him – continues to accuse us. It comes through preachers and teachers of the Word, it

comes through your devotional Bible reading, and it comes through your own conscience. And I can't say it any more clearly than this: if it doesn't fill you with the fear of God's wrath and judgment, then you are not listening to what it's saying.

In today's Old Testament lesson the prophet Malachi speaking of John asks, "Who can endure the day of his coming?" The implied answer is no one. John came to knock us all to the ground not just once; but continuously. This is clear from what he tells the people who ask him, "What should we do?" His answer is "Amend your ways. Stop sinning in the ways that are common to your walks of life." Tax collectors were notorious cheats. They made their money by over assessing people and keeping the difference. John tells them not to use their power to take advantage of people. He told the soldiers the same thing. They were paid next to nothing; but they could use their authority and force to shake people down – and they did. What needs to be understood is that neither soldiers nor tax collectors could survive in that culture by being honest. It was naturally assumed that they would supplement their income in dishonest ways.

We don't have those same problems in our culture. Most people have jobs that at least pay the bills without having to do anything overtly dishonest – but that's the kicker: I said *overtly* dishonest. What is naturally assumed is that you will use your wits and ability to get the best deals, bargain for the best rates, outsell the competition, elbow in to get your share of the market, and use whatever leverage you can. We call it good business. What it is, though, is looking out for number one. Or say it another way, it's using your power to take advantage of people. It's so ingrained in us that we take it for granted – and we don't think of it as wrong. But is it the love and charity that God calls us to show for our neighbors? Of course not; not even close.

And that's the point. John calls us to repent and change from being what we are down to our very core: sinners in love only with ourselves. He calls us to make the changes that will reveal underneath whole new levels of sinfulness that we didn't even think about before. The fact is that there's more dirt in the closet and under the bed than we imagine. Now, that's not to say that we shouldn't make the changes that we have pointed out to us because in this life there's no end to them; no that would be a surrender to sin the same as Herod's. We are always to strive for personal holiness.

But here we want to be careful. It's interesting to me that there were people in the crowd who thought that John might be the Christ. On account of his preaching they felt the wrath of God, they repented, and they resolved to live better lives in the future. Who knows, maybe they even kept their resolutions. And having made an improvement in their lives, they wondered what more the Christ could possibly do for them. Believe it or not, a lot of Christians today make the same mistake. They think that the faith is all about learning how to live a better life. And in so doing, they effectively turn from the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the preaching of John.

But John is not the Savior. He is only the forerunner. His job is to prepare us for Christ's coming. He does it by spurring us on in the quest for righteousness and holiness precisely so that we will discover in the process how deep and desperate the problem really is. It is not enough to talk about it in the abstract. Through the proclamation of God's Law you have to experience it. His goal is to get us to the point that we cry out with Paul, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

He does this precisely because it's then that he can point out to us the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – the One, he says, who will baptize us in the Spirit and with fire. Indeed, he is the One who was baptized for us with the Spirit in the Jordan River, and who was baptized later for us with the fire of God's wrath when he surrendered himself to the cross and grave.

God sent John to prepare you to receive *that One* with utmost relief and joy. So, with all this in mind, my question this morning for you to consider is this: "What is John saying to you now?" If he were here this morning, if he were the one looking into your life with his absolute objectivity, his fearless pursuit of perfection, and his utter lack of concern for how he might hurt your tender feelings – what would he say that you should do to prepare yourself for Christ's

coming? What sin or sins that you've come to cherish, or learned to hide, or have made a compromise with, or that you'd rather not think about would he put his finger on and say, "This right here. You know what God says about this – that it is an offense to him and worthy eternal damnation. No more games. No more evasions. It's time to give it up. It's time to repent and to believe the Good News."

I'm betting you already know what he would say, don't you? It is my Advent prayer that having revealed our sin, our gracious Father will by his Spirit bring us to true repentance so that we will, with joy and thanksgiving, receive the King who comes to cleanse and forgive us, and that he will raise us up with him to new and holy life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!