

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 4, 2022

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## Baptized with Fire

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This section of Matthew is often referred to as John the Baptizer's "Fire Sermon." It certainly fits the standard of a "fire and brimstone" message of the sort still commonly proclaimed in some church spaces today. I don't know about you, but I can easily imagine this oddly dressed preacher by the name of John standing on one of the corners of Colonial Williamsburg with a megaphone delivering this "Fire Sermon." You've likely seen figures like this at CW or perhaps some other street corner.

How do those preachers make you feel? Do you enjoy "fire and brimstone" sermons? Or does all this talk of judgement and repentance make you uncomfortable? Do you generally cross the street in order to avoid having to interact with messages of condemnation? Do you pick up your pace in order to get by an evangelizer's list of terrible, unforgiveable sins and trespasses? Would you have been one of "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea"<sup>1</sup> going out to John?

This language can make us pretty uncomfortable. It can also seem incongruous with other messages proclaimed in the Gospels. What do we make of this repentance, worthiness, and fire language? And how does this sermon of John's fit with verses like Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged," Matthew 9:13, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners," and Matthew 18:21-22, "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"

The Gospel, which means good news remember, teaches that God is merciful towards sinners. Jesus proclaims the good news that God's grace is

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:5a (NRSV)

poured out upon all people. Christ routinely reaches out to those on the outskirts, those who don't have their lives together, those who are incredibly broken and feel unlovable. Our Savior makes it clear that God's love, grace, and mercy are for all. So how do we deal with the call to repentance and the threat of fire we hear in our reading today? How is this Gospel good news? Or is it nothing but Law?

That's actually one answer some theologians provide. John, according to this interpretive theory, represents the Law; and Jesus' teaching and preaching represents the Gospel which then supersedes and replaces the Law. This theory ends up doing a disservice to John and the Law though, doesn't it? If Jesus and the Gospel replaces or supersedes John and the Law, what purpose is this fire sermon? What purpose is the Law? Why not just have the Gospel? Is there really a need for John and the Law to "prepare the way of the Lord" and "make his paths straight"?

The answer to those questions is an unequivocal yes! For we **need** the Law. And we need these messages to come to us in this explicit order too. We need the Law in order to truly hear and experience the Gospel. We can see this need at work right there on the banks of the Jordan river. The large crowds coming out hear the message of this bizarre Baptizer are then baptized while "confessing their sins."<sup>2</sup> They hear John's message warning them that they are not living as God created them to live. They hear his call to repentance and from those messages they are moved to the water.

They confess their sins and are baptized. But what is sin? I think the reason we get so uncomfortable with the Law, with repentance and fire language, is because we have come to associate sin with shame, guilt, and condemnation. Sin has become an ethical or moralistic word. In modern usage it seems to mean being "immoral" or making "mistakes". And there is some small truth to that. But by focusing overly much on those definition I believe we miss the mark on what true repentance is.

Repentance is less about naming specific sins and trying not to repeat them and more of an acknowledgement of disconnection or even estrangement. Estrangement from God, from our neighbors, and even from creation. Confession, which is more about naming specific sinful acts is absolutely required for reconciliation and healing. But I would argue that repentance, while it can involve such confessing of sins, really requires us to go deeper

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:6b

than that. Repentance means admitting that we refuse to live as God created us to live, admitting that we refuse to honor the reality that we are connected to God, one another, and creation. Really, repentance is about recognizing our refusal to become fully human.

Once we have admitted all this. Once we have had our eyes opened in the apocalypse of God's in-breaking kingdom. Then, and only then, can we turn to the source of life and identity. Once we understand our estrangement from life around us as well as our estrangement from the very source of life, then we can start to be who we were made to be. As Luther puts it in his Heidelberg Disputation, "It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ."<sup>3</sup> We must see that we are not, and never have been, islands. We cannot move through life in disconnection and estrangement.

And that's the truly amazing thing about repentance, it means that we are totally and completely laid bare before God. Repenting means allowing God to truly see us. Now, of course God already truly sees us, but we need to know that we have been seen. Repentance is, perhaps above all else, our acknowledging that we can't hide anything from God. And the Gospel good news is that God sees us, to our very cores, and loves us completely.

Perhaps the fire and winnowing fork images are necessary because we can relate to them. But perhaps they are meant more as loving tools of apocalypse. Tools that get rid of the stuff we try to use to hide from God (or at least the things we **think** can hide us). Maybe this is why John is so incensed when the Pharisees and Sadducees come out to the river.

John suspects, perhaps he even knows, that these professional religious leaders have no interest in repentance. They are too enmeshed in some of the most popular means humanity has to try to hide from God: for the Pharisees, hiding from God behind scrupulous attention to scripture and for the Sadducees, hiding from God behind the traditions of the Temple system. They are not ready to despair of their abilities, their wills, their tools; they cannot yet give them up and be laid bare before God.

We do much the same, looking for ways to try to hide from God. In the end we haven't moved very far away from the Garden of Eden wherein Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther. "Heidelberg Disputation: Theses 18." 1518.

evening breeze...and hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”<sup>4</sup> We do our best to avoid being seen by God. Perhaps out of shame. But I suspect its more because we know that being seen by God, and knowing that we are seen, will mean being changed. It will mean no longer being able to tolerate being less than fully human. It will mean an end to apathy and carelessness. It will mean seeing how our connectedness means that our actions have consequences, not just for ourselves, but for others and the world God made. It will mean being unsatisfied with anything less than living as we were made to live, in the very kingdom of God.

So, are you ready to repent? Are you ready to confesses your sins? Are you ready to let go of the ways in which you try to hide from God? Even religiosity? Are you ready to despair of your own abilities and will? Are you ready to be unveiled, revealed, and laid bare before God? And do you trust that after such an unveiling God will still love you? That’s faith after all. That’s the Gospel good news that Christ proclaimed: God sees you and God wants you to truly see yourself. And having seen yourself, having seen your own estrangement and disconnection, God offers grace. God offers relationship. God offers connection. God offers true life and full humanity. God offers an ever loving, accepting, and merciful gaze. So repent, my siblings in Christ, and be **seen**! Repent and be loved. Repent and be who God made you to be. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:8