

Mark 1:4-5 John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Matthew 3:7-10 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

Dear Fellow Believers Waiting for Jesus:

Sainted Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Prof. Siegbert Becker once shared this quote: *"Take away the aroused conscience and you might just as well turn the churches into dancing halls."* In other words, if we folks are no longer troubled by our sins or about the punishment of God we deserve because of our sins and what happens to us when we die, then the church doesn't really have any reason to exist anymore. The church serves no useful purpose.

We can also apply that truth to this season of the year. Take away the aroused/hurting conscience, and we might as well turn Christmas into the 4th of July or any other secular holiday. If we don't care whether or not we're sinners, then Christ's birth has no significance.

When we sing, *"'Tis the season to be jolly,"* it's also good to do some serious thinking about why we can have true joy at Christmastime. It may seem paradoxical, but it's all about **sin** -- and a Savior from that sin. From Mark and Matthew we learn today that **"John the Baptist Prepared People for the Savior"** (1) *By showing us the need*, and (2) *By calling for a change of heart*.

1

I'm sure we all have a picture in our minds of John the Baptist doing his important spiritual work along the River Jordan. Many people from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside came to him as he was preaching and baptizing. Matthew tells us that some who came to see John were Pharisees and Sadducees. They did not come *"confessing their sins"* like the common folks. They were on a fact-finding mission. John was not one of their sanctioned teachers, and that meant trouble.

The **Sadducees** were an influential sect of the Jewish church. Many of the chief priests were Sadducees. What's really strange is that they believed that this life was all there is to existence. They didn't believe in an immortal soul or a resurrection from the dead or heaven or hell. It makes you wonder why they were part of a church or had a religion at all!

There are people in our world today who think the same as the Sadducees. Maybe some are your friends or coworkers, people who live only for today because they feel there is no tomorrow. To such people, the birthday of Jesus can never mean what it ought to mean. The Christmas account is just a sweet story about a sweet little baby born in an idyllic barn that tugs on emotional heartstrings. For such people, this baby is no Savior. How can you believe you need a Savior if there is nothing to be saved from? However, sweet baby stories don't quiet the constant, painful gnawing of the human conscience that tells us that there is right and wrong, and that we are responsible to a higher Power who is much greater and holier than we are when we do what is wrong.

And then there were the **Pharisees**. The apostle Paul called them the strictest sect of the Jews. He should know. He had been one of them. Pharisees did believe in life after death and the coming resurrection. But their problem was this: they believed they were good enough on their own to get to heaven. They had Abraham's blood flowing through their veins. They felt that was automatic qualification for eternal life. That's why John told them: *"Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have*

Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Blood descendants of Abraham were a dime a dozen and DNA has nothing to do with salvation.

People who feel they are good enough for heaven because of their conduct or heritage don't see a need for a Savior any more than people who don't believe there is a heaven or a hell. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were in the same boat: they had no clue how lost they really were and how much they needed a Savior.

How about us? Can we find meaning and joy in Christmas this year in the middle of a pandemic? What if we can't gather with family and friends? What if we can't afford the same quantity or quality of gifts? Is Christmas ruined? Is that what Christmas is about? May God help us through his Word to understand and take to heart the real meaning of Christmas: the gift of our eternal salvation!

2

At the Jordan, John the Baptist said, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"*** (Mt. 3:2). Repent really means to change your mind, to think differently than one ordinarily thinks.

A **Sadducee** *would repent* if he started believing that there is life after death and places called heaven and hell. If you truly believe there is a hell, you truly don't want to be there!

We need to be careful not to be like the Sadducees. If we spend more time thinking about who the Packers should draft next year or what my next Facebook post should say than about where we or our friends and family will spend eternity, then we need a change of mind also. What do you suppose is first and foremost on *God's* mind: our creature-comforts and pastimes *or* our eternal destiny? Baby Jesus was born here first and foremost to redeem our souls.

On the other hand, a **Pharisee** *would repent*, i.e., change his mind, if he would stop thinking of himself as someone who is good enough to get to heaven. As John reminds us, every last one of us are by nature bad trees that deserve to be ***"cut down and cast into the fire"*** (Mt. 3:10). If we remember that, we will rejoice greatly this Advent that, despite our world's woes, Jesus was so kind and so loving toward sinners like us that he would allow himself to be born in a manger and die on a cross to save us from the sin that would have condemned us to a place of separation from God called hell. As we sing in Advent hymn (CW) 32 v. 1:

When sinners see their lost condition and feel the pressing load of sin
And Jesus comes on his blest mission to heal the sin-sick heart within,
All grief must flee before his grace, and joy divine will take its place.

Joy divine! That's what we have through Jesus. The sadness of our sin is replaced by the joy of our salvation! May John the Baptist's message help us to remember this important truth this Advent season and all year long.

Amen.