

The Advent of Grace III – *Luke 1:76-79, Mark 1:1-5, John 1:29*

The Tender Mercy of Repentance

Introduction – Luke’s gospel begins (after the preamble) with the conception and birth of John (the baptizer). Mark’s “*gospel of Jesus Christ*” starts with the ministry of John. And John’s gospel (not the baptizer, but one of Jesus’ disciples) almost immediately focuses on the witness of John the baptizer. Advent is full of references to this man and so it seems that the Advent of Grace must take him into account as well. But do we think of the ministry of John the Baptist as a ministry of grace?

The Song at His Birth (Luke 1:76-79) – John’s father prophesied that his son would be “*the prophet of the Highest*” preparing the way for the Lord (v76). That way is the knowledge of salvation by means of the forgiveness of their sins (v77). That salvation is through the tender mercy of God (v78), a mercy that shines out like the rising sun at dawn after a long, death-like, dark night of the soul (v79). He would show the people how they were at war with God, or rather how God was at war with them and the purpose of his ministry would be “*to guide our feet into the way of peace*” (v79).

His Ministry (Mark 1:1-5) – John was “*the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,*” and a fulfillment of OT prophecies. He was the messenger sent to prepare the way (v2, Mal 3:1) as a voice crying in the wilderness to make the paths straight (v3, Isaiah 40:3). John preached a *baptism of repentance* and his popularity with the people was so great that “*all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him*” (vv4-5).

His Goal (John 1:29) – John was not trying to start a ministry, a following. His goal was to be a red signpost that said, “Wrong Way,” and then point them to where they needed to go. “*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” John didn’t come to be the Light, but to bear witness of the Light (John 1:6-8).

The Trouble with John – Like the “Wrong Way” sign, John’s ministry seemed to upset what appeared to be the normal flow of life and religion. In Matt 3:7-12, John does not do “friendship evangelism” the way we think it should be done. He calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a bag of snakes and mocks them for joining a movement (publicly joining in on the baptism of repentance) all the while denying that wrath was upon them. John was imprisoned and later beheaded for calling out Herod and Herodias for their sexual immorality (Matt 14). John’s willingness to stand up to the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the corruption of the political leaders probably helped his popularity among the common people. And yet, he did not come to free innocent victims from tyranny (Luke 3:7ff records that Jesus called the multitudes a “*brood of vipers*” – not just the Pharisees). He came to call all of them to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. This was the tender mercy of repentance.

Repentance – “Repent” doesn’t sound like a gracious call and repentance doesn’t immediately seem like a tender mercy. But it is, in the same way that “stop, you are going the wrong way” are gracious words. The Greek word means “to change one’s mind” and in its common usage included the idea of turning around and heading a different direction.

Repentance Requires Humility (Luke 18:9-14) – Repentance is hard on the flesh because it requires humility. We want to go before God and make note of our good works, defend our slight failures, and compare ourselves against other sinners. We might try to convince God and make resolutions that we are and will be better. Instead, repentance simply falls down before God in raw humility – “*be merciful to me, a sinner.*”

Repentance Requires Confession (1 John 1:8-9) – The word confession in Greek literally means “to say the same thing.” It means agreeing with God that the sin you committed is exactly that – it is falling short of God’s glory. It also means agreeing that you deserve the just penalty for that sin.

Repentance is NOT Penance – It is important to note that repentance is not about feeling really bad about your sin (the fact of the matter is that you cannot feel bad enough about your sin to impress God). There is a sorrow that leads to death and a sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:9-11). In addition, it is not about beating yourself up for your sin or making up for your sin with good works, donations to the church, or saying more prayers. If it was, then there would be a way to earn your way back into God’s favor.

Repentance is an Evangelical Gift (Acts 5:31, 11:18) – Like faith (Eph 2:8-9), real repentance is something God gives. He gives it through the preaching of His Word, the conviction of sin (which is the opening of eyes, turning to the Light) and turning you around by means of His Holy Spirit (from the power of Satan to the power of God). Outside of this work of God, our repentance on our own will be pitiful, something else to be repented of. That is partially why Jesus was baptized by John in this baptism of repentance (Luke 3:21-22).

Christmas and Ongoing Repentance – Advent is not a season of self-loathing or penance. Advent/Christmas is a celebration of the One who came to us and for us, and who gives us repentance and faith – because we need both.

But just as Christmas comes around again and again, so our lives are to be constant with repenting. And just as you are blessed with more Christmas gifts this year, so there are more gifts of repentance for you. Where are you going the “Wrong Way”? Christian, you must repent of your sins. And “*where sin abounded, grace abounded much more*” (Rom 5:21). Here is the gift of repentance. It is a tender mercy. Merry Christmas.

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence,
Mercy calls you; break the chains,
Come and worship, come and worship
Worship Christ the newborn King.*

Dave Hatcher – December 15, 2019

Notes for Little Saints

As you listen to the sermon, draw a picture below of the end of a dark night with the sun just beginning to rise – and John the Baptist preaching to the crowds.

“...to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death...” (Luke 3:79).