

Dear Friends in Christ,

Did you know that on June 16 this year a resolution was submitted to Congress asking that July 2nd be declared a “National Day of Personal Repentance and Reflection”? It was referred to committee and I believe the resolution died there. What is interesting is that this was not the first time this was brought up. Congress called for eight separate days of Repentance, Fasting and Prayer during the Revolutionary War. Several presidents have decreed such days including Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln wrote an address to the nation during the Civil War. It was his proclamation for a national fast-day, by which he did designate and set apart Thursday the 30th day of April 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer.

Lincoln wrote: “It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.”

“The awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people.”

“Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity, too proud to pray to the God that made us.”

“It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

—The Bible Friend Tan, P. L. (1996). Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times (pp. 1129–1130). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

Perhaps President Lincoln was aware of John, the Baptist’s words in Matthew 3. The prophet and forerunner of the Messiah makes a strong call to repentance which includes trusting in the forgiveness of sins in the coming Savior. The Holy Spirit uses John’s words to call you and me before Christmas. We are to **Repent, For the Kingdom of Heaven is Near**. Let’s take a moment to reflect on and understand John’s inspired words.

1. Repentance prepares us for the present coming of the kingdom. Vs.1-6

I am sure that you have a list of things to do before Christmas. Is “repentance” on that list? It needs to be because repentance prepares us for Christmas or as I will put it today, it prepares us for the present coming of the kingdom.

A. John the Baptist was preparing people for the coming of Christ. He was preparing their hearts through the Lord’s word.

1. We have a summary of his message, “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**” (2) The word “**repent**” means to “have a change or turning of the heart.” What was he asking them to repent of? Notice it says that John was preaching in the wilderness. He did not preach in the beautiful buildings of the Temple. He did not go to the market places or their homes. The reason was that the Jewish people were fixated on the affairs of this life. They were in love with material goods and riches. In their worship they were going through the motions. They were giving God a minute of their time, but they couldn’t wait to get out of worship and make more money, to take care of their problems and enjoy life.

Does this sound familiar? It should, we are no better. Our minds are always wanting to cling to the things of this life. Maybe our focus right now is on gifts or Christmas gatherings. We want to get out there and deal with our troubles so we can get rid of them and have a good time. We may want to show up in church simply to make sure that God helps us achieve our selfish goals. We aren’t really interested in thinking about him and his kingdom. To this attitude John says, “**Repent.**”

2. We cannot change our hearts, but God’s word makes the crooked paths in our heart straight. The voice tells us how crooked our hearts are and it crushes us. We cry out, “*Lord have mercy!*” Then we are told as John did in his proclaiming, “**The Kingdom of Heaven is near.**” It means that the Savior is coming. The message the John proclaimed included the thought that the angel shared with Joseph the carpenter in a dream, “**He will save the people from their sins.**” John would later point to Jesus and announce, “**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**” You and I know that Jesus, God’s Son, took away the sins of the world when he sacrifices his body, blood and life at the cross. The people did not have to wait for the Savior to receive forgiveness. Forgiveness had been proclaimed by prophets even before John’s day. There was forgiveness for all who believed in the coming Savior. The forgiveness was sure because God’s promise of the Savior was sure. God always does what he promises. In that forgiveness crooked hearts are made righteous or “straight” with God.

B. John's proclamation was to do more than change hearts. It was to also change people's outward lives. Then they would be prepared to meet the Savior King when he arrived.

John's humble heart of faith was reflected in his humble dress and diet. We are told, "**John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.**"

(4) The people's humble hearts of faith were reflected in their actions.

Matthew reports, "**People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**" (5-6)

C. You've taken time out of your busy week to come to church, some of you will come again on Wednesday evening. You did this to hear pastor call you a "*crooked sinner.*" The crowds came out in large numbers to hear John. They did it because they knew they weren't right with God and they needed forgiveness and salvation. They were not disappointed and you shouldn't be either. It was worth the drive. You also hear tonight that you have forgiveness from God. He gives it just as he promised through the coming Savior. You and I know him as Jesus. We will gather soon to celebrate the Son of God being born as human being. That Savior came to take away our sins. Jesus did that at the cross. Jesus came to have us declared righteous. He did this for you at your Baptism. He has prepared us for the kingdom by making us members of his kingdom.

2. Repentance prepares us for the coming of the future kingdom. Vs.7-12

Jesus was not coming into the world to simply make us members of his kingdom. He has bigger plans. He wants us in his eternal kingdom. So John the Baptist proclaimed a message that prepares us for the coming of the future kingdom.

A. Many of us are thinking, "*I have to get prepared for Christmas. I have a few gifts and some food, but I have a lot more to do.*" We want to be ready on time. More important is for us to be ready for Judgement Day, Christ's Second Coming.

1. One group in crowd that came to John was unprepared. It was the Pharisees and Sadducees. John said to them, "**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**" John knew they did not have humble hearts of faith. How so? A fruit tree produces fruit. These men were children of God so they should have produced fruit of repentance. They were not sorry for their sins and they were not trusting in the coming Savior for forgiveness. The

reason they did not repent is because they thought they were okay in their relationship with God. They were Abraham's descendants. They would get to heaven on that alone. Rather than being humble they were arrogant. This was because they did not take the Word of God to heart. So John tells them they are in danger of being cut down on Judgement Day just as a farmer cuts down unfruitful trees.

2. Do we feel we will go to heaven because we are outwardly decent people or because our parents were pious Christians and we were raised in a Christian home? John calls us to repent of our arrogance and self-righteousness. We need to confess our sinful unworthiness and our need for Jesus. With a humble heart of faith we receive his gracious gift of salvation.

B. John reminds us that only Jesus can save us.

1. He testifies that he is only the instrument. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus is powerful and he sends his Holy Spirit to cleanse our hearts from sin. The fire of God's word purifies us and makes us holy. So does Holy Baptism. If we ever troubled by sin and guilt look to Jesus, he will cleanse you.

2. When Judgement Day comes it will be good. Jesus will separate us from all that is evil. He does that as easily as a farmer in his day took a big fork and separated the good grain from its husk or shell. The good grain was taken to the barn, the leftover chaff was burned. So the Lord will take us to his "barn" called heaven. There we will be with our loving Savior.

Conclusion: Presidents have called for National Days of repentance.

John the Baptist calls on us to daily repent and trust in the Lord. This is what Martin Luther also says when he speaks of the meaning of Baptism for our daily lives. *Fourth: What does baptizing with water mean?*

It means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever. Where is this written? St. Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, "We are buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." In this way the Lord has prepared us to live in his kingdom now and forever. Amen.

Salvation History: John, the Baptist, prepares the people's hearts for the coming of the Savior through a proclamation of Law and Gospel. The prophet prepares our hearts for the coming of Jesse's greater Son, righteous Savior and King who turns us from wickedness to righteousness. Malady: Do we ignore the call to repentance? Do we see ourselves as being good enough? PS: Listen to John's call to repent and receive the Kingdom of Heaven in Jesus the Savior.

Matthew 3:1-12
(NIV 2011)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'" [Isaiah 40:3]

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 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. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

(NIV 1984)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'" (Isaiah 40:3)

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Acts 3:19-26

(NIV 2011)

19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. 21 Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. 22 For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. 23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’[a]

24 “Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. 25 And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’[b] 26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

Footnotes:

Acts 3:23 Deut. 18:15,18,19

Acts 3:25 Gen. 22:18; 26:4

(NIV 1984)

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. 21 He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. 22 For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. 23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.’

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Isaiah 11:1-10

(NIV 2011)

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to
him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Footnotes: Isaiah 11:6 Hebrew; Septuagint lion will feed

(NIV 1984)

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from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
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Daniel 4:19-37

(NIV 2011)

(NIV 1984)

Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you." Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! ²⁰The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, ²¹with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air— ²²you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

²³"You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.'

²⁴"This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. ²⁶The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. ²⁷

Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

The Dream Is Fulfilled

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

³¹ The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³² You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

³³ Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

³⁴ At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

³⁵ All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: “What have you done?”

³⁶ At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.