

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand”

Matthew 4:12-25

Following Jesus’ Baptism and John the Baptist’s pronouncement of Him to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, Jesus begins His public ministry.

We have seen how John laid the groundwork for the public ministry of Christ. John was the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord.’”

What was John the Baptist’s message? Matthew records in his Gospel, “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” [Mt. 3:1-2]. We tend to find no difficulty in associating John the Baptist with that sort of admonition for the people. After all, John is the guy who said to the Pharisees, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” That was way back in Matthew chapter three.

But we see here in Matthew chapter four that Jesus begins His preaching ministry with the same words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, was

correct in his emphasis that there must always be maintained a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Walther wrote, “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Gospel is preached first and then the Law . . . [or when] the Gospel [is preached] to those who live securely in their sins” [p. 2].

We follow the example of Christ (and John the Baptist). If the church preaches the Gospel first and then the Law or not the Law at all, we may make an impression on many people as being non-judgmental – something our post-modern culture praises. However, the impression the Gospel makes will not even dent the surface, because the hearers will never be made aware of their deep sinful depravity and their absolute need for forgiveness.

There is a reason we confess our sins at the beginning of the worship service before the Gospel is proclaimed – even though, the Gospel is there even in the words of the Invocation as we are reminded that we have been baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But we come before our Lord with the need to acknowledge that we are poor, miserable sinners – that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and what we have left undone.

We acknowledge the need and desire to amend our sinful lives. And

after our Old Adam has been crushed down by the Law, we are raised up with the sweet words of the forgiveness of sins announced in the Absolution.

When Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, He wants His listeners, both then and now, to acknowledge our sin, and pray for the strength to turn away from the sin that plagues us – especially our pet sins which we don’t think are all that bad.

There is no way that we will ever overcome the sin in our lives. We will never even approach the standard set for us by God. The good news is that Christ met that standard and has overcome sin for us. Salvation has been provided through no work of our own. Even the very act of repentance is no work of our own. This is the Holy Spirit working in us. The Word of God crushes our sinful nature, turns us, changes our mind so that we now think differently than we did before. However, just because all of repentance and salvation is God’s work and not ours, this does not excuse us to where we can remain comfortable in our sin, remain unchanged, and blame God for not doing a better job in turning us.

The message of God has always been the same. Ezekiel said, “if I say to the wicked man, ‘You will surely die’, but he then turns away from his sin and does what is right . . . he will surely live; he will not die. None of the

sins he has committed will be remembered against him [Eze. 33:14, 16].

Ezekiel 33 is one of my favorite parts of the Old Testament. However, the Lord continues with a warning: “if he does not turn, he will die for his sin.”

John the Baptist preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” But he did not leave them with only the Law. As we heard last week, he proclaimed Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear that “from that time Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” But we also hear later in our reading, Jesus “went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”

C.F.W. Walther is right. There needs to be a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. We hear it in the preaching of the prophets. We hear it in the preaching of Christ our Lord. I pray we always hear it from the pulpits of our churches. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Look at your sin and know that you cannot solve this or fix this. But there is Good News. “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Amen.