

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

**“In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”** (Mt 3:1-2).

In those days, is intentionally vague.

Those days include all our days—

all the days of this life that we find ourselves in the wilderness,
all the days we realize just how wretched we are,
all the days where *repentance* must come forth.

The Church prepares for the Advent of her King by repentance.

She prepares by hearing the prophet’s call to turn away from her sin,
to stop her deeds of darkness,
recognize how fallen, ugly, and ruined she is,
and to believe in the promise of forgiveness,
a forgiveness that includes even us.

What sort of word is “repent,” though?

Is it a demand or a promise? Is it good or bad? What is it?

Repent is both a word of Law as well as Gospel; *demand*, as well as *promise*.

“Now, strictly speaking,” our Confessions read, “repentance has two parts:

- First is contrition, that is, the terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin (you know you’ve done something wrong);
- Second is faith, which, born of the Gospel, the *Absolution*, trusts that for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven.”¹

And so to properly “repent” one must both confess and believe—
turn *from* sin and cling *to* Christ.

Repentance is physical—

certain actions, gestures, and words go along with it.
repentance isn’t a mind game—
it’s visible, tangible, and noticeable.

Repentance may include tears or bended knees,

it might show itself in fixing what’s gone wrong, paying back what’s owed,
but it *always* includes an, “I’m sorry,” or, “I was wrong.”

To admit such a statement is to give up control.

It’s to make yourself vulnerable, weak, and unprotected against your enemy.

¹ AC XII.3-5.

When you say, “I’m sorry,” you give power to the one you’ve wronged—
 you can’t control what he or she does with your “sorry;”
 they’re free to accept or decline,
 to pronounce forgiveness or to say, “that’s not good enough!”
 And whichever they choose, isn’t yours to control—
you’re not in charge.

That’s why St. John the Baptizer wasn’t shy with the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!” (Mt 3:7)

They came to Baptism like they’d come to a circus, a bar, or sports game—
 as far as they’re concerned, nothing special was going on here,
 just another crazy Jew thinking too much of himself.

They were deceitful, proud, and without *repentance*.
 (They’d of been better off if they were just deceitful and proud—
 Baptism has a way of fixing that—
 But being without repentance is being without *faith*.)

These Pharisees and Sadducees were comfortable with the Lord they knew.
 They boxed Him up such that His call to repentance wouldn’t interfere with their lives.

They were in charge, *they* had the upper-hand, *they* decided who’s truly repentant or not—
 “Now, who’s this *John* baptizing with a baptism of *repentance*?
 What right does he have to call *us* to repentance?”

Well, they’ve got a point—John’s a strange figure:

“Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Mt 3:4).

Moreover, it was a bit odd for him to be out in the Jordan River washing people with water as they confessed their sins (Mt 3:6).

But John’s day had long been coming—

Isaiah prophesied this very event:

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight”** (Mt 3:3; Isa 40:3).

John is the Prophet *preparing the way of the Lord*—
 his voice cries out, preparing the way for Jesus—
 and he does it by preaching repentance and baptizing with water (Mt 3:11).

Repentance and Baptism go hand-in-hand.

As the Gospel of St. Mark confesses:

“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16).

And St. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, says the same:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you’ll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and all who are far off” (Acts 2:38-39).

What is it about this baptismal *water* that prepares the way for Christ?

The waters of baptism are waters combined with God’s Word and included in God’s command,
waters that work forgiveness of sins,
rescue from death and the devil,
and give eternal salvation to all who *believe* this.²

But to those who don’t *believe*,
to those who have no *faith*,
those without *repentance*,
the benefits of these waters are lost.

John the Baptizer wasn’t a magician,
the Lord doesn’t work by magic—magic’s in the realm of coercion, deceit, and falsehood.
No, the Lord works through His *promises*—
promises of life, deliverance, salvation, and joy,
promises of freedom, hope, and love,
promises of peace and forgiveness and setting right what’s gone wrong.

The waters aren’t magical, but they do carry the Word of God with them.
And so it’s certainly not just water that does these great things,
But the Word of God *in* and *with* the water,
along with the Faith which trusts this Word of God in the water.

Repentance includes faith,
faith in the Word of God,
faith in the *promise* of His deliverance, His salvation, His work.
As Luther says, “Whoever believes what the gospel declares has what it says.”³

The Gospel declares that in this Jesus,
Whose way John the Baptist prepares,
There is true repentance:
A true turning away from the wrath of God and a trustworthy promise of
sins forgiven *for you*.

To understand Repentance rightly,
to understand it *in the way of the Gospel*,
is to understand repentance as a *gift*.

² Small Catechism IV.

³ Martin Luther, “Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent, Second Sermon (1533),” *The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1:27 ff.

Repentance is something *given* to you.

It's something the *Lord* does in you and for you by His Word.

You've all got some idea of what Jesus is like.

Many of you have had quite a few years hearing about who He is and what He's about,
but where we all go wrong is thinking that we've got Him figured out.

We get it wrong when we make a nice little box for this Jesus we know and love—
where we can store Him away safely,
and visit Him as we like—on our terms, on our time.

We get it wrong when we settle for what He's given us, sitting back, protecting that until the end.
We get it wrong when Jesus' coming is old-hat, nothing new, same-old/same-old.

“Repentance is the [gift that strips] away everything that closes Jesus in,
everything that is unwilling to risk His being more for you.”⁴

Repentance is the gift that bulldozes your man-made mountains and valleys—
it's the preaching that tears down your false comforts, false expectations, and false gods;
it's the preaching that fills up your emptiness, your fears, your darkness.
Repentance is the gift that bestows Christ, what He's done and who He is *for us*.

**“In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:1-2).**

Repent.

Confess your sins and believe in the One who is greater than John—
Whose sandals John isn't even worthy to carry (Mt 3:11)—even Jesus Christ,
Who is more for you than you'd ever expect.

Trust His promises given to you in Holy Baptism:
promises of life and salvation, the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins.

Because the coming of Christ into this world,
into this flesh,
is the sign of *God's* repentance *for us*.

Jesus is the One who turns God's anger and wrath away from us,
and gives Him to love us and cherish us as His own dear children.

Repentance comes to us as a gift—
Drawing us out of ourselves, away from our sin, and into the baby Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

⁴ Norman Nagel, *Select Sermons of Norman Nagel*, p.??