

ADVENT 2, A – December 8, 2019
SCRIPTURES – Ps. 105; Isaiah 11:1-10; Rom. 15:4-13; Matt. 3:1-12

[John said:] "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Matt. 3

We have entered a time of year when rituals are increasingly sought out and emphasized. They are many and varied: going out to cut down a Christmas tree and bring it home... putting up lights and decorations... lighting the Advent Wreath... seeing a performance of the Nutcracker... watching a holiday movie. Some traditions are more regional than seasonal. Last week I went to a rodeo in Bulverde, TX. Along with bull riding and calf roping I enjoyed a special tradition: Mutton Bustin'. 4-7-year-old kids, wearing helmets and pads, would be put on the backs of sheep. The, out of the shoot they would run, with the kid trying to hang on for 8 seconds. One 4-year-old immediately slipped to the side of the sheep but hung on there like a stubborn tick, until the sheep finally stopped. Mutton Bustin'! You won't see it in New England!

Today John the Baptist comes and interrupts this special time of ritual and remembrance. **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"** he shouts. **"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. For even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."** So much for our comfortable rituals!

John is not a comfortable preacher. Did you ever wonder: why did he choose the wilderness as the place to call people to repentance? It would have been more difficult for people to go there, after all. Why not in nearby Jerusalem, and in the temple courts, the place of repentance and forgiveness? It surely would have been an area familiar to him, for his father was a priest. The temple courts were always crowded, and with people who were spiritually concerned. It would have been a prime place for his preaching. So: did John go to the wilderness specifically because he wanted to be *apart* from the rituals of the temple, with its sacrifices and the mediation of its priests? Was he bringing a *new* way of repentance; one that was more personal and heartfelt? His pointing out especially the Pharisees and Sadducees as people needing to repent makes it seem so. The people considered them to be the most religious in Israel, those closest to God; and ritual is what they were all about. The Sadducees, for instance:

- They were responsible for the temple: its buildings, and all of the implements used in it; the conduct of its worship; its sacrifices, and the animals used for them; the training of the priests (who were Sadducees), and the upkeep of their robes. They were keepers of the traditions, a professional and well-paid chancel guild!

And the Pharisees: they were very religious lay-people who were all about ritual.

- They prayed at set times every day. A Pharisee in the market at the time of prayer would stop, bend low and



say one part of his prayers, move on, bend low and say another part, and so on, until he was done. And, while in the market, he would be very careful to avoid touching any person or thing which he considered unclean.

- They were also very meticulous about their dress. A Pharisee's robe had memorial fringes on its hems, as did also the garment that covered his head. He wore a phylactery (a little box containing on parchment four passages of Scripture) on his left arm, near his heart, and on his forehead. They were fastened on by black leather straps, which were wound 7x around the arm and 3x around the hand and fitted to the forehead in a similarly prescribed way. They believed that God Himself wore phylacteries.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John cried out when they came to the wilderness to see him. *"Your rituals are a hindrance to true faith and worship!"*

Yes, they were. But, John went into the wilderness to do more than just call the people to change a few traditions and behaviors. They needed to be converted, turned back to God and given new hearts. They needed to become like Israel centuries before. After God brought them out of Egypt He purified them in the wilderness. They wandered through it for 40 years, until every one of those who had opposed and grumbled against Him after they left Egypt had died. A new people were now to enter the land God had promised them. Joshua, their new leader, brought them into it through water – the Jordan River, whose waters God parted for them – and then circumcised them. Now they were God's holy people, ready to live in His land and serve Him. John the Baptist entered the wilderness to call his people back to this. He baptized them to make them a people holy to the Lord and ready for His coming kingdom.

You have been made a people holy to the Lord, His new people. He has chosen you, delivered you from your sins, made you His and given you His Holy Spirit in the water of His Son's baptism. His kingdom has come to you, and He rules for you, in you, and through you!

And yet, you and I live in an old world: a world that tempts and distracts us with its pleasures... that weighs us down with its arguments... a superficial world where people judge by what their eyes see, and decide disputes by what their ears hear. The daily drumbeat of these things, combined with our own selfish desires, threatens to deaden us to God's mighty presence. And, the result? You know, *you feel*, the result. Life becomes a shuffling from one responsibility, one chore, to the next. Worship becomes stale and empty, a matter of seemingly useless traditions.

"Repent!" John cries. He's not telling us to get rid of a few traditions and behaviors, or come up with new ones. Go back to the wilderness! God chose you, and saved you in Christ, and filled you with His Spirit when you were nothing and had nothing to give Him but your sins and emptiness. He baptized you and bathed you in Christ's holy life, His death for your sins, and His resurrection to a new life. God brought His kingdom to you in Christ! Because of this you not only have eternal life with God in His beautiful heaven awaiting you one day. You have God with you now, filling you with

His Holy Spirit and directing you in your ways. And, you have worship that is far more than just traditions. God's kingdom – His saving and ruling presence in Christ – comes to you:

- In His words that you hear and sing;
- In His Sacraments that you receive.

Look in faith to this and rejoice in the new life in Christ that God has given you, and with which is constantly renewing you! Fill your mind, and so your heart, with His words. St. Paul says they were ***“written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*** (Rom. 15)

We have so much more than do those who have only traditions and hopes and dreams, and so often feel empty at this time of year. Our hope is sure and certain, for Christ Jesus is living and ruling among us. As you remember and rejoice in your baptism... as you honestly and humbly confess your sins to God and receive His forgiveness in Christ... as you fill your ears with God's Scriptures... and as you gladly take Christ's body and blood into your mouths, God will fill your heart with His hope and joy. Christ will shine in you and in your traditions, and so shine through you. His light in you will bring hope and joy to those who walk in darkness, to the glory of His name.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom. 15:13) To the honor and glory of God our Father, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.