

Second Sunday in Advent

FRUITFUL FAITH

Matthew 3:1-12

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Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 4Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

DIAGNOSIS: Rotten

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Whose Reign?*

Out of nowhere comes the announcement by John that the reign (kingdom) of God has come near. Jesus says the exact same words when he begins his proclamation (4:17). But just as Luther first defines “God” in his explanation of the First Commandment in his Large Catechism, so “God” and “reign” need to be defined, and defined by Matthew, not by our own ideas. After all, we hear “God bless America” more often than we hear “the kingdom of God has come near.” Surely “God bless America” influences our ideas of the reign of God. And when the majority of TV preachers speak of a “Prosperity Gospel,” that surely influences our ideas of the reign of God. Matthew uses the word “kingdom” fifty-four times. (Four times “kingdom” is used as a synonym for country or nation. The other fifty uses are all connected to God or Gospel or Jesus saying “my kingdom,” or more often, Jesus referring to his Father’s kingdom.) Matthew does not develop the idea of the reign of God as he testifies to Jesus. No, he has already seen the reign of God in Jesus’ death and rising. The death and rising of Jesus is how Jesus “saves his people from their sins” (1:21). When John announces that the reign of God has come near, Matthew is saying that Jesus on the cross, the person and the event, have come near.

No better definition of “God” than Luther’s. God and faith go together. Whatever one has faith in, that is one’s God. Whatever one looks to for good, whatever one looks to for comfort or safety when troubled, that is one’s God. So, when we say, “Today was a good day because such and such,” that “such and such” is our God, for it made our day good. So, it is in the midst of all those “such and such” gods, in the midst of all those days that out of nowhere comes the pronouncement that the reign of God has

come near. All those other ideas of God and what God is doing are no longer valid. Here comes God's own announcement of how God is going to rule over all people who trust other such and such-es for goodness in their life.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hiding Our Chaff*

The people of Jerusalem and Judea had a God who created them, who made a promise to Abraham and Sarah, who delivered them from slavery, and who gave them laws just for them to obey, just as all other peoples had their laws to obey. All people have laws, for law is how God already reigns over people. So when God is coming to rule, the best thing to do is confess one's disregard for the laws, which is the same as disregard for God's reign. But the problem is that disregard for God's reign makes people chaff, chaff that God "will burn with unquenchable fire" (v. 12). So how did the people dare confess they were chaff? For John proclaimed that God's reign had come near, a new reign had come near, a reign that was not of the law, but of mercy and forgiveness for the sake of the one who made the new reign happen—Jesus. It is those who do not confess, who do not trust Jesus as the one who brings the good of God's mercy and forgiveness, who remain chaff.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Rotten*

But people presume to have Abraham as their ancestor (v. 9), as if one's genealogy is better life insurance than trust in Jesus and his reign of God. Some Americans presume to have "God bless America" as their heritage; others proclaim that success and prosperity and riches—money, health, family, reputation, education—are better ways to know how God rules their life than in Jesus who rules from a cross. Such claims are not the fruits of repentance. Repentance is turning in trust toward Jesus, and the fruits of such turning are trust, faith, Christ's heart and mind, the Holy Spirit, and the giving of Christ's love and forgiveness to others. The reason the orchard owner cuts down a

tree is not because there is no fruit, but because the tree is rotten. The ax is for the root, not the branches. But everywhere is heard the urging for prosperity. And “God bless America” is trumpeted, as if that is enough to justify any war. Shout prosperity and call for blessings all you want, it still gets you nowhere.

PROGNOSIS: Fruitful

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Reign of Jesus, Crucified*

Out of nowhere comes the reign of Jesus, crucified. “The soldiers stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Mt 27:28-30). When Jesus was crucified, “Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’” Matthew quite clearly tells us who the king is. Matthew tells us who reigns over the realm of God. He lifts him up on a cross so all can see him—this is Jesus, the one who saves people from their sins. For God’s reign is even over death, for God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus then declared that all authority, all reign over people, belongs to him. He rules as the giver of God’s mercy, love, forgiveness. To know God is to know Jesus, nothing else. If one knows God any other way, then Jesus is disregarded and there is no mercy, they know only the reign of God through law with the ax poised at the roots.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Faith Taking Root in Us*

The resurrection of Jesus convinces people that Jesus is God’s reign over their death, over their disregard for God’s rule, even over God’s own wielding of the ax. You might say Jesus took the ax (was cut down) when he was on the cross. Now Jesus rules

with his nail scarred hands, hands that forgive and bless. We trust Jesus as the giver of good things from God—especially the good gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 11).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruitful Living*

As Jesus is the giver of God's good gifts of mercy, love, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit, we use those gifts so that others are ruled by Jesus' goodness. As Jesus rules us with forgiveness, (as the rule of Jesus is only forgiveness), so we also live by forgiveness, assuring others that they are ruled by Jesus, not by the threat of an ax at their roots. The rule of Jesus is not just how Jesus rules me, but how Jesus reigns over all people. So I cannot think that I am ruled by forgiveness but the next person is not. Since Jesus' reign is for all people, since his reign extends over all people, those who have repented, turned to Jesus, are not to look elsewhere for ways God deals with other people. Since Jesus says God reigns over us with mercy, we are not willing to put a different rule over others, or ourselves. Mercy and forgiveness are the fruits of repentance. We are subject to mercy and forgiveness, not to the ways of prosperity or laws. As the reign of God in Jesus is to serve us by his death and rising, so we live in a realm where service is the way we treat one another. We live according to what we trust. We trust the king with a crown of thorns, a cross for a throne, and resurrection to be given to all.