

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
December 8, 2019

The Ghosts of Christmas Past Haunted Because I Can't Ever Be Enough

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² 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.'"*

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."

Dear brothers and sisters, sinners and saints,

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That simple sentence summarizes John the Baptist's message and Jesus' message (Matthew 4:17). But what is "the kingdom of heaven"?

First of all, it is a synonym for "the kingdom of God." Where Mark and Luke use "the kingdom of God," Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven." In fact, he is the only gospel writer to use that term. But what is "the kingdom of heaven"?

When we hear the word "kingdom," we typically think of territory. The Jews were longing for a return of the power and extent of the kingdom under King Solomon. That's probably why Matthew, writing especially to people of Jewish background, used kingdom of heaven rather

than kingdom of God. His Jewish friends may have heard “Kingdom of God” as a kingdom here on earth.

But the kingdom of heaven is not about territory here on earth, not now and not in some future millennial kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is present where the King of heaven reigns.

1 Kings 4:25 describes Solomon’s reign as king this way: “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel... lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree.”

Isn’t that a great picture? When the King is present, we are absolutely safe. Isn’t that what we really want for Christmas?

There is safety in the King’s mercy. As the King reveals himself in his earthly ministry, King Jesus was merciful. For those of us who are reading through the Gospel of Luke this December, we just read that powerful account of Jesus welcoming the ministry of the sinful woman. “She who has been forgiven much loves much.”

You may feel like you are an outcast from your family, that others look down on you, that you are a failure. But the King always invites you to come and sit with him under his tree and enjoy his safety.

There is the safety of the King’s protection. He is the almighty whose miracles showed his power to help his people in every situation. Whatever you are facing this Christmas season, whatever challenge or fear, you can call on the power of the King of the universe.

Of course that doesn’t mean that he will give you the Christmas dream that you envision. We live in the safety of the King’s wisdom. When we trust his love and his power, then we can trust that he is working everything for our good.

And ultimately, the safety of the kingdom of heaven is that our King lives forever and is able to give us a life that will never end.

If we enjoy and appreciate the safety of the kingdom of heaven, it is truly all that we need. Our glass is full!

The Key to the Kingdom of Heaven is Admitting You are Not Enough

But not everyone will enter this kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees wanted none of it. “We have Abraham as our father.”

Their lives were already full. They didn’t need what this king has to offer. They didn’t value it.

And so John calls out to them, “Repent!”

What does repent mean? Using the picture of a glass, it means to empty yourself. You see, if you think that your value before God and others depends on yourself, if you are “full” from trying your hardest, then the milk of God’s promises can’t pour into you. It is just a mess.

Sadly, that is how many of us see our lives. God make promises to us, but those promises are not enough. We are wiser than God. We want what God doesn’t want to give us. We don’t believe his forgiveness.

So we look at ourselves as this mess—what do we do? Sadly someone people think, “My life is ruined,” and they try to throw their lives away. Isn’t that what is happening when any of us contemplate suicide? My life is a mess? I can’t clean it up. I might as well throw it away. Isn’t that what we face when we are depressed or seek to ease the pain of disappointment in the bottle or sexual encounters or in lashing out at others? My life is a mess! I can’t clean it up. I might as well just throw it away.

But your life isn’t worthless just because it is a mess. Your life is of infinite value. That is part of the message of Christmas, that the King of Heaven has come down to save you.

What is the solution? To empty yourself. To admit your life is a mess and ask God to fill it.

That’s what we do when we confess our sins. We empty ourselves.

Let’s spend a few minutes doing that right now with the Christmas season in mind. Let’s read Galatians 5:19-21.

“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Look at that middle section. Doesn’t that empty you as you think about your Christmas celebrations? How much hatred is there? Discord? Jealousy of what other family members have? Fits of rage when you can’t deal with all the Christmas pressure. Selfish ambition as we compare our Christmas with others.

Empty yourself. Repent. Admit that you don’t deserve to have a part in the kingdom of God.

Then, come here and find safety in Christ’s forgiveness. Come here and find safety in his power to do all that he knows is good for you. Your life is not spinning out of control. Come and find safety in his wisdom, that he knows better than we what is eternally good for us and for others. And ultimately come here and find safety in Christ’s promise that God has a better, eternal, joy-filled life for your in heaven.

Come and see the kingdom of heaven is enough.

The Kingdom of Heaven is Present Where the Spirit is Active

John reminds us of the greatness of our king.

“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.”

When Jesus reigns as king in your heart, he pours his Holy Spirit into you and his Spirit is powerful. Do you recall the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23? “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Brothers and sisters, when you see that your Christmas preparations are starting to destroy this fruit, then go back to the first message of repentance. Am I putting so much pressure on myself to be “enough” this Christmas, that it is destroying the fruit of the Spirit? What am I doing that is pressing the Spirit out of my life? Find someone to talk to about it? Empty yourself again by repentance. And then be filled again with the safety of Jesus’ kingdom. Forgiven. Protected. Guided. With a life that will never end.

There are a lot of things that won’t get done this Christmas. We will almost certainly disappoint someone. But take heart, the kingdom of heaven is enough. There is nothing more you need. Amen.

My Next Steps to Christmas Joy

- **See the Kingdom of Heaven:** Join us in reading Luke during December and see the King reveal himself in word and deed. Put your email address on the Connection Card and receive the daily reading every morning.
- **Admit the emptiness within:** We long for the coming of the King and his kingdom when we see the need for him. Read again the flesh/Spirit contrast in Galatians 5:19-23. Where do you see more of the flesh and less of the Spirit in your life because of your Christmas busyness?
- **Look for the emptiness in others:** Christmas can be a difficult time for many people. Whom can you invite into the Kingdom with you this Christmas season by spending time with them, or by including them in your celebrations, or by inviting them to the Christmas services?

GroupWork

1. What stresses you out the most as you prepare for Christmas?
2. The kingdom of God (Matthew usually uses the term “kingdom of heaven”) is present where God reigns as king. Read Psalm 72 where King Solomon describes the reign of Messiah King. What phrases from this psalm comfort you?
3. Read Matthew 3:1-12. The way into God’s kingdom is to repent. How would you explain “repent” to a six year old? Do you recall the picture pastor used in his message?
4. Read of the flesh/Spirit contrast in Galatians 5:19-23. Where do you see more of the flesh and less of the Spirit in your life because of your Christmas busyness?
5. Read Luke 3:1-18. Luke’s account includes examples of “fruit of repentance.” Looking back at your answers to question 5, what might be a fruit of repentance that you will produce through the power of the Holy Spirit working in you.
6. Close with the reading of Acts 2:38-39. In the closing prayer, claim for yourselves that promise of forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit in your baptism.