St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI
Second Sunday in Advent – Year A
Matthew 3:1-12
December 7, 2025

**Sermon Matthew 3:1-12**
**Ready or Not, Here Comes the Judge!**

Do you have the bucket of salt by the garage door ready to sprinkle of the sidewalk ready to work its anti-slip snow dissolving magic? Did you buy a new snow shovel with the bend in the middle ergonomically designed to be a back saver while lifting the weights of heavy snow or at least dig it out of the summer storage spot and report ready for duty? Did you pour fresh gas into the tank and do a tune up of the snowblower so it's ready to belch the fresh snow as far as the eye can see? If you have lived in Wisconsin for a while you should have learned this lesson already but maybe it takes a while to teach an old dog new tricks, but ready or not here comes Old Man Winter already last weekend in all his snowy, windy, zero-degree fury. It doesn't take much to convince us to prepare for winter in Wisconsin. If you have ever had to change a flat tire in January with three feet of snow piled high on the shoulder of the road with no hat and gloves it only takes that one time to teach you to be prepared for the rest of your life. I may or may not be speaking from experience. Put a hat, gloves, a blanket and maybe even a small shovel to dig out of a snowbank should you find yourself in the middle of one this winter or at the minimum have the insurance card with the roadside emergency number on it. Preparation makes all the difference between having fingers and toes on the edge of frostbite and getting through whatever winter predicament you find yourself in. If you are not prepared yet after last weekend and the frigid temperatures this week you better get prepared now because thoughts of springtime flowers and May showers aren't coming for the next three to four months as the slippery snow, ice, and corresponding salt are here to stay. Preparation is so important. God's Word teaches us how vital preparation is. In fact, spiritually it is a matter of life and death because ready or not, here comes the Judge.

We prepare for winter by stocking up on hats and gloves, shovels, snowblowers, and salt. This advent season God tells us how we prepare our hearts because the Judge is coming, whether you are ready or not. To find that answer we go to an unlikely mouthpiece in an unlikely place. We are not seeking the sage advice of the teachers of the law at the temple courtyard. We are not taking preparation notes from the recognized religious leaders in Jesus' time. That's where you would expect to find answers. Instead, we go outside Jerusalem, outside of the hub and center of the Israelites' worship life to a place that is physically inconvenient. It's out in the wilderness, out of the population center, out of the place you would expect people to pay attention. We come to the banks of the Jordan River. We come to an inconvenient place to hear an inconvenient, yet not surprising, message. 700 years earlier than what takes place in the Gospel Lesson Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah, *"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Matthew 3:3)*. We walk out to the wilderness and find a man not draped in the finest tunic, but camel's hair, which was the prepared fashion of prophets and enjoyed the nice crunch of locusts and washed them down with some wild honey. These things were not designed to impress, but it does impress upon us that the message was more important than the man.

John proclaimed in an inconvenient place a message that is inconvenient to us by nature. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:1).* There wasn't much that brought the Pharisees and Sadducees together at that time, but their equal hatred for someone proclaiming a message about the kingdom of God did. The Pharisees and Sadducees were competing religious groups, and they came to the Jordan to see the spectacle of John and what he was doing and didn't have any thoughts of repentance on the mind. Maybe they were trying to trap him, maybe they were trying to keep their enemy close. John exposes them in unrepentance when he says, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you out of these stones God can raise up children for*

*Abraham. 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" (Matthew 3:7-10).* Amid the beautiful setting of twinkling lights and the aesthetically pleasing poinsettias today John brings calls of rebuke and repentance. Maybe our reaction is, "Could you dial it back just a bit today in this season of tidings of comfort and joy?" God through John puts front and center before us today there is no comfort and joy without rebuke and repentance.

Brothers and sisters, we need this wake-up call to repentance because so often we want to resist repentance. Don't think so? Think about this; when confronted with sin how do we react? Do I follow the example of first ones to fall into sin, Adam and Eve, and try to hide our sin? If that doesn't work, I can cozy up with Moses and offer excuse after excuse on why I can't follow God's commands. Finally, if all else fails, I can just blame someone else even up to and including, like Jonah, God himself. All of those are efforts by the sinful nature to avoid repentance, to not confess our sin, and the sinful nature hopes it can keep our sin behind the scenes of all these excuses and keep committing them. Ready or not, here comes the Judge! The Pharisees and Sadducees were not ready and John point out if they think they can hide behind who they are then they need to hear the harsh message of judgment. Produce fruits of repentance flowing from the heart in the gospel, not outward attachment to your ancestry. If that is the case the ax is lined up and ready to strike in judgment. If you and I refuse to repent of our sin and find friendship with the Pharisees because our actions are just like theirs the ax is at the root of my tree and is ready to strike in judgment.

Ready or not, here comes the Judge with his judgement. How are we prepared? Repentance is neither convenient nor comfy for the sinner. Niceties and platitudes and trying to soften the truth of what God says today does not remove one stain of one white lie of a sin that condemns you and me. Confessing our sins before God exposes our sins. Repentance exposes the reality of what I should receive because of my sin. I should face God's judgment in all its wrath and fury. Repentance is neither convenient nor comfy for the sin. Repentance doesn't pat us on the head and say, "There, there, it's going to be ok." Repentance violently exposes the lies of Satan who would love nothing more than for you to be chopped down in judgment with him for eternity. Repentance doesn't end with confessing my sin, but it exposes me to my Savior with a heart of faith. It is there that we ultimately have peace. In our Savior Jesus there is no need to try to hide our sin, to excuse it, or blame others for it. Christ has done away with it. Christ has taken it on himself and paid for it. Brothers and sisters, if we don't take our sin seriously then there is no need to take our Savior seriously either. God teaches us today that he is deadly serious about our sin and deadly serious about our Savior that died on the cross to save. If we don't take our sin seriously then we have no need for a Savior and we can convince ourselves, we don't need to prepare because there is nothing to prepare for.

*"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. 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" (Matthew 3:11-12).* Ready or not, here comes the Judge. It is with repentant hearts we are ready because a heart producing fruits of repentance does not look to itself, but in the one that came for us. Through the gift of faith by the work of the Holy Spirit we are forgiven by our gracious God who gathers us to himself. A repentant heart worked through faith God gathers to himself in Christ. Jesus knows a thing or two about judgment. He doesn't just return as Judge, but he was the one that took the wrath of the Father's judgment for you and me. He was cut down in judgment so that we are spared. He was forsaken by his Father because of the judgment that should have been upon us, and by his sacrifice for us we are brought into God's family. Now God judges us not according to what we have done, but according to the perfection that is given to us through Jesus.

It is ____ degrees today. Ready or not winter is here. But we are not focusing on snow and ice. God focuses us on repentant hearts ready for our Judge to return because for us with hearts of repentance through faith in him we are prepared. You are ready, here comes the Judge. Amen.