

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” John’s voice cried out with a message familiar to the people of Israel. Prophet after prophet had uttered that word, or ones like it, “Repent!” Do not journey down the road you are on. You must not travel any further. Turn back. Put to death your current deeds and way of life. Be turned back toward God to embrace what He has to give you! Repent!

But what was different about John’s words was the immediacy of the message. “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” All the other prophets continued to speak of a future time of judgment and salvation, even if Israel was already enduring one of God’s acts of judgment and deliverance. That is because the prophets always pointed to an even greater act of God coming to save and judge, one that extended past the boundaries of Israel. They looked for the Messiah who would come to re-establish God’s rule over a fallen and dying world.

But John’s message was not pointing ahead to a future act of God. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It is here, now, before your face. Matthew says that John’s message came “in those days.” What days was he referring to? During the previous chapter, Matthew began unfolding that future, greater act of God that the prophets spoke of and longed for in the unfolding history of Jesus of Nazareth. It is in these days of fulfillment that John Himself comes as the voice, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is here now. The time of fulfillment has begun—the days of the long-expected, end-time Christ.

And there is only one proper response to such news: Repent! Because the King that is coming to claim His throne is coming to judge the world. All will have to face Him. All will receive from His hand either salvation or judgment. Repent! That is why John is out there in the wilderness, beyond the Jordan. This is where Israel first entered the promised land long ago. This is where they reaffirmed God’s Covenant and were renewed as God’s people before taking possession of the land. This is where they would have re-entered the Promise Land after returning from the Babylonian exile. John is out there in the wilderness calling Israel to become God’s people once again. He calls them to be renewed so that they may receive the Lord’s salvation when His Chosen One appears.

For now was the time that the God of heaven was going to break into history to reign, to act as King, in judgment against His enemies, and in salvation for all who would call upon Him. Because that is what the kingdom of heaven is: the kingly activity, the reigning, the deeds that God the King is now beginning to do as John proclaims. God is beginning to act! The announcement of the nearness of such divine kingly action is to say that the Last Days have begun.

That might seem a weird message to modern Christians in our own time and place, but that is how those listening to John would have heard the message. We have grown accustomed through Christian fiction and certain theologies to apocalyptic visions of the end of the world, of the earth becoming a hellscape with battles being fought between the armies of God and the princes of this world. We have been told that the hope of Christianity is dying and going to heaven and that the Last Days are left to some poor, unfortunate souls in the future.

No, true Christian hope is not some sort of escapism where we dream of taking flight and leaving this world behind us. No, the prophets longed for the days when God Himself would rend the heavens and come down to us here on earth. Many first-century Jews longed for the day when the King would reestablish his rule over a fallen and dying world. And they believed that this would begin with the decisive intervention of God in history. His end-time judgment would fall upon those who refuse to repent and believe His message, and His end-time salvation for those who do. And this divine intervention is precisely what John proclaims, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

If we have not been taught to long for the true God to come down and renew His creation, then it won’t mean much to say that the saving power and deeds of the Last Day have *already entered* human history. Instead, we look around and wonder where God’s kingdom is. For we see a world at the mercy of Satan, sin, and death, and we long for escape. But if we seek what the prophets foretold, for God to come down to us to rule and to reign and to recreate, then we see the one to whom John points. We see the one who is mighty to save, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The one who brings judgment and salvation by His life and death. We see Jesus, and in Jesus, we see the end-time rule and reign of God has drawn near, and is here and now.

We Christians should know this well. Our final judgment has already come. We do not have to sit and wonder what our fate will be when Jesus comes again. We know that we have already been judged and the verdict

rendered. Our sin was condemned to death in the body of Christ. He took our sin within Himself as He hung upon the cross, and He endured God's righteous wrath and judgment against our sin, the perfect sacrifice. Our sin consumed, there is now nothing left to condemn us. As Jesus said with those final words, "It is finished." God's end-time judgment was rendered complete; His wrath was satisfied against us.

Those who receive the kingship of Jesus receive the benefits of His sacrifice. We receive His forgiveness, life, and salvation as our own. We inherit His everlasting Kingdom as our promised land. The Word of God, through John and the other prophets and evangelists, called us out of the wilderness to come to the waters of Baptism. When we were baptized, we were brought face-to-face with that end-time judgment of God as it was applied to us personally. We were made to be the people of God. For in those waters, we were united with Christ on that cross. Our sin-sick souls were crucified with Him and carried into His death. But then Christ brought them through the grave and with Him into His resurrection to eternal life.

We were made into a new people, a people marked by our Baptism, and as the people of God we were ushered into the end-time kingdom of God, already in our heavenly home, already possessing eternal life. But as the people of God, who were brought through those life-giving waters, John's words still echo throughout in our hearts and minds, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As people of God, we continue to repent. Not because we are lost and in need of salvation but because until Christ returns to consummate the end of the age we still find ourselves in this body of flesh, which carries within it our sin until our bodies join Christ in death or He returns and we finally become what He is making us to be.

And so God's end-time rule and reign continue to come to us as He rends the heavens open and comes down. He comes down in His Absolution and Word, now proclaimed by the pastors of His Church, bringing blessing to those who receive and believe it or judgment upon those who reject Christ as their King. And as we receive His Word, we receive it in His Holy Spirit, who not only brought us to life in our Baptism but continues to give us faith and strengthens our spirit to resist the temptations of the flesh and to trust ever more in Christ's salvation. And as we live our baptismal life, the Spirit continually brings us to repentance, burning away the sin that would condemn us and raising us to new life in Christ.

And the Spirit helps us see that in this new life, God has indeed come down to intervene in History, that His rule and reign has been brought to us in Jesus, not only when Christ walked the earth, but even now as the Spirit continues to rule and reign in us. And He continues to bring people face-to-face with the end-time judgement of Christ in His Baptism and His Word and in His Supper for repentance and forgiveness for all who receive and believe.

Amen.