

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Come, Lord Jesus!*
Service Theme: *Come, Lord Jesus, as Judge!*

Sermon Theme: Rejoice to Meet the Judge (December 4, 2022)
Matthew 3:1-12

I was thinking about the design for our family Christmas card this week, and it can be kind of stressful, you know? Not only do you have to pick out the perfect picture, you've also got to nail the message. You can go with a simple "Happy Holidays," or "Merry Christmas!" Or, you can focus on the reason for the season with "Christ the Savior is Born!" or a Christmas Bible passage. But I think I've really got a winner this year—the perfect message to spread Christmas joy and capture the Christmas spirit. Next to a nice picture of our family of 5, it'll read, ***"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"***

That one's going on your fridge, right? Or maybe not. Because a message of impending judgment hardly seems like the sentiment we want to hear as we're preparing our hearts for Christmas.

And yet, maybe it's the message we need to hear. Because during Advent, we're not only preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem. We're also preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus, the Judge of all.

Out of all the pictures the Bible paints of Jesus, Jesus as Judge might be the one that makes people feel the most uncomfortable. We like Jesus the powerful King who rules over all for our good. We like Jesus the gentle Good Shepherd who guides and protects us. We like cute little baby Jesus, born to set us free. But Jesus the Judge? Not so much. Because we know what judges do—they declare people guilty, and sentence them to punishment.

So instead of praying, ***"Come, Lord Jesus, As Judge,"*** like our service theme, we might instead want to pray, "Don't come, Lord Jesus!

Please stay away!" However, as we hear John the Baptist's message this morning-- even if you don't want to put it on your Christmas cards-- you'll at least understand why his message can allow us to **Rejoice to Meet the Judge.**

If you worshiped with us this past Wednesday, you heard the context of John, the miraculous son of old Zechariah, and his old, barren wife Elizabeth. Before his birth, an angel had prophesied that John would ***"go on before the Lord...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*** And after years of waiting for God's perfect timing, John began his ministry of preparing people to meet their Lord.

As fascinated crowds trekked long distances out into the wilderness around the Jordan River to see this mysterious prophet, they heard him preaching ***"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,"*** as he warned, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*** And as John baptized people in the Jordan River, and preached to the crowds, he made it clear that they needed two things: Repentance, and the forgiveness of sins.

Everyone needed those two things because the Judge would come in judgment. As John graphically warned, ***"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,"*** saying of the Judge he was preparing them to meet, ***"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."***

Since we're not ancient Israelite farmers, that picture might need some explanation. When farmers harvested wheat, they needed to separate the grain from the loose husk, the chaff. So they would take a winnowing fork, like a big pitchfork, and toss the wheat into the air. The heavier grain would fall back to the ground to be collected and stored in the barns, while the light, loose chaff would get separated by the wind to be collected and burned up in the fire.

That's a picture of what the Judge will come to do. God sent John to prepare the Israelites for that truth, and to prepare us for it too! We

need that warning, because when Jesus comes again at Judgment Day, all people will stand before him while in his righteous judgment, he separates the grain from the chaff, the righteous from the wicked.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and so many others who came to check out John's message were confident that they had a "get out of hell free" card up their sleeve. But John quickly sets them straight. ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'"*** John shoots down the two things they were confident would get them excused from judgment: their outward acts of religious piety, and their ethnicity and bloodline. But John warned them that it didn't matter whose blood ran through their veins if no blood was shed for their sins; that they were fruitless trees, whose actions were simply "going through the motions" rather than motivated by faith; that the judge already had his ax at their roots, ready to cut them down and toss them into the fire.

And that's why the thought of Jesus coming as Judge makes people uncomfortable. Because we know the truth. God's requirement for people is and has always been ***"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."*** And no one can honestly examine their lives-- all of their actions, words, thoughts, and motivations—and really believe that they've been holy. We might try to use good things we've done, or our membership in a Christian church as evidence, but we know the truth. Judges don't acquit guilty defendants who got caught with the smoking gun because they've been nice in the past. We haven't been perfect. We are far from holy. Every sin we've committed with our hands and hearts, minds and mouths is evidence for a guilty verdict. Every sin is known by the Judge, laid out neatly as evidence, exhibits A through infinity that we're guilty as sin, because of our sin. What Paul writes in Romans is true of us also. ***"There is no one righteous, not even one."***

It's understandable when a defendant with mountains of evidence against him shrinks in fear when the judge walks into the courtroom. Because he knows what's coming. He knows the judge will bang that gavel, and sentence him to life in prison. And it's understandable that

so many people shrink in fear at the thought of Jesus coming again as Judge. So many try to wish that Judge away, trying to salve guilty hearts by telling themselves that a loving God would never judge or condemn; that a loving God will just shrug off everyone's sin, a winking grandpa who says with a chuckle, "Oh, don't worry about that. Here, have some ice cream."

But isn't mankind's desire for a lenient judge pretty telling? Guilty defendants hope for lenient judges who look the other way at crime. But everyone else, especially those close to the victim are rightfully up in arms if a judge doesn't enact justice, right?

I'm reminded of the Chanel Miller case. In 2015, Chanel Miller was sexually assaulted while unconscious by a wealthy, Olympic hopeful Stanford swimmer named Brock Turner. After the trauma of reliving the horrific crime committed against her in court, Turner was found guilty of 3 felonies. But Chanel's heart sunk, because her assailant was sentenced to just 6 months in jail, and ultimately went free after 90 days for good behavior. Rightfully so, an uproar started after the lenient sentence made national news, and the judge who issued the sentence became the first judge to be recalled from the bench in California in 80 years. Because justice wasn't served.

But what does that tell us if we think secular judges need to enforce justice, but many balk or rage at the idea that the God of the Universe enforces justice over the law he placed over his creation, and planted in our hearts? It tells us we all know we're guilty, and deserve to be sentenced for life, to eternal death in Hell.

That's why John's message to prepare people to face the Judge doesn't revolve around being good enough or trying to earn God's love. If we're guilty, and we know it, our only hope is found in our guilt being removed—paid for by another. That's why, to meet the Judge, repentance and forgiveness is necessary!

That's why John warns, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*** That's why John told the people, ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."*** That's why, when the crowds heard John's

message they “***Confessed their sins, and were baptized by him in the Jordan River.***”

That means we need to properly define “repentance.” Many people think repentance simply means feeling bad about your sin, as if repentance is all about emotions. But a judge won’t acquit a defendant if he cries. Repentance isn’t about emotions as much as motion.

Genuine sorrow over sin—not sorrow over the consequences of our sin, but sorrow that we’ve failed to show love to God by sinning against him—is certainly a necessary part of repentance. But that sorrow must be accompanied by turning. Repentance means pulling a 180 in our hearts and minds about sin, turning away from sin and selfishness.

But repentance also includes faith and trust. Scripture makes clear that the only way sinners like us can be righteous is through faith in the forgiveness Christ won for us. As Paul writes in Romans, ***This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.***” Repentance is about more than turning away from sin—it’s also about turning to Christ, in faith trusting in him for the forgiveness and acquittal we so desperately need!

Then, from that repentance and faith comes the “***fruit in keeping with repentance***” that John talks about. Not good works that make us righteous before God, but good works we do by faith to thank God for making us righteous before him through Christ’s righteous life and his substitutionary suffering and death for us!

That changes the mood in the courtroom, doesn’t it? All the “bloody murder weapon” evidence of your guilt scrubbed clean in the blood of Jesus! The Judge no longer looking at all the evidence that condemns you, but looking at all the evidence that he was condemned—for you.

You see, in Jesus the Judge, we see the perfect juxtaposition of justice and grace! As a God of justice, punishment for the sins of the world needed to be carried out. But as a God of grace, the punishment was placed not on those who deserve it, but on God himself. The only sinless one. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

And that’s why we pray for Jesus to come as Judge with confidence and joy. Imagine standing trial before a judge who knows all your guilt, but who also loves you perfectly, and knows firsthand that you’ve been forgiven and justified of your guilt-- because he himself willingly took the punishment for your crimes on himself. That’s what it means to stand before Jesus, when he comes again as Judge! We can look forward to standing before Jesus on the Last Day with confidence and assurance, because when Jesus came into the world the first time at Christmas; when he came as the powerful one “***who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire***” that John prepared the people to meet, he came not as Judge, but as your Savior!

And Jesus coming as Judge isn’t just comforting because of his grace to all who believe in him. It’s also comforting that Jesus will judge with justice and righteousness. Because in this world, we don’t always get justice when someone has harmed us. Sometimes, criminals go unpunished, or the punishment hardly feels just. Those who sin against us might never acknowledge their fault. But the Judge knows. And if you’ve been afflicted, overlooked, or traumatized; if you’ve been robbed of justice in this life, take heart. Because when the Judge comes again, justice will be served!

So even if you don’t want to put John the Baptist on your Christmas card, you can still pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, as Judge!” with eager anticipation. You can rejoice to meet the Judge, because when you stand before him in faith at the Last Day, he will look at you, pound his gavel and say, “Not guilty! Because your Judge, is your Savior.”