

The Time of Fulfillment Has Begun

Matthew 3:1-12

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear repentant people,

Since the fall into sin, the whole history of the world is divided into two distinct eras: the first is the time of promise and preparation. From that very first promise of God to “put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman, / and between [his] offspring and her offspring,” and that he would “bruise” the serpent’s head while the serpent would “bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15, ESV), throughout the time of the patriarchs, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the time of Israel in Egypt and traveling through the wilderness, the time of Israel’s kingdom, and the time of the prophets who came with messages of repentance, up to the time even of John the Baptist who was the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness, / ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’” the world was in the time of promise and preparation. It was during this time that God was subtly guiding history until its fulfillment, and he contended with the forces of Satan and sin and sinful men, who thought that they could still thwart God’s plans.

But now we are no longer in that time of promise and preparation, because “Beginning with the conception of Jesus, the time of fulfillment has begun – the days of the long-expected, end-time Christ.”¹ The time of promise and preparation was thoroughly the work of God through the Word, the Scriptures. And Jesus said, “it is

¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 157.

they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39, ESV). Likewise, Peter proclaimed, “And [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43, ESV). We clearly understand, therefore, that the time was promising and preparing for Jesus Christ, and that

I. Jesus Christ Is That Fulfillment

This was the work of John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets. “[t]he one who comes after me is mightier than I,” he said. “I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” He even explicitly pointed out the one who came after him, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, ESV). Jesus came. The people of Israel awaited the Messiah’s coming for millennia, and finally he came. He was conceived in the womb of a virgin, appeared to a few when he was born in a stable and laid in a manger, and made his public appearance when John baptized him in the Jordan river. Then, fulfilling the victory he was prophesied to win, he died on the cross, and he rose from the dead, proclaiming that “death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom. 6:9, ESV), that

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’
 ‘O death, where is your victory?
 O death, where is your sting?’ (1 Cor. 15:54-55, ESV)

and that the head of the serpent is crushed.

So, seeing that the prophecies of Jesus' first coming have been fulfilled, can you even begin to doubt that those of his second coming will be fulfilled?

In fact, it is the second coming which is the thrust of much of John's preaching: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." This baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire has a dual effect: as on Pentecost, the believers receive the Holy Spirit with salvation, and are enabled to proclaim the Gospel, and the tongues of fire that appeared on their heads are as harmless to them as the flames on the bush that Moses saw; but the second effect is "the second death, the lake of fire," which John describes in his Revelation: "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14, 15, ESV). This Jesus also describes: "Let both [the weeds and the wheat] grow together until the harvest, and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matt. 13:30, ESV). But meanwhile, Paul says of us: "In [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14, ESV).

The baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is all about eschatology – the end times. Notice the audience John addresses in his speech: both those who "were baptized by him...as they confessed their sins," and "many of the Pharisees and

Sadducees.” And John says, “Jesus ‘will baptize *you*,’ both those who are repentant and those who are not.... ‘[T]he Holy Spirit’ and ‘fire’ correspond to ‘eschatological salvation’ for baptized believers and ‘eschatological judgment’ for unbelievers.”² For believers, the Holy Spirit is the “down-payment” of our final salvation, and the fire (of persecution, of pain, of life) now demonstrates to us the presence of our saving God – as, again, the fire in the bush told Moses that he was in the presence of יהוה. For unbelievers, the Holy Spirit is a witness of condemnation, and the fire is the promised destruction.

The Pharisees and Sadducees and their ilk did not understand the nature of things rightly. They wanted to get the salvation of God by riding on their ancestry: “We have Abraham as our father”! They sought to rise up of themselves. But John proclaimed to them, “Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones.” Their expectation *should* have been, as ought ours to be, that “Final salvation [does] not consist of God’s people ‘going up.’ Salvation mean[s] that God came down, and final salvation [will] come about on the day when God [will] rend the heavens once more and come down to save.”³ That is, salvation is intimately sacramental: coming down from God to us humans on earth. This was the nature of the incarnation: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, ESV). This is the nature of the Lord’s Supper, with Christ’s body “given for you,” and his blood, “poured out for you”

² Ibid., 157.

³ Ibid., 161.

(Luke 22:19, 20, ESV). It is the nature of baptism, and the Word, “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39, ESV). Salvation *came* that way in Christ, who lived and died for us. And it *will come* that way in Christ *in finality* on the Last Day. His kingdom *has come*, that is, his act of reigning has begun, for the King was crowned on Calvary. His kingdom will fully come when we share in his glorious reign.

And likewise, the way into that kingdom is *given* to us sacramentally. That is, through repentance. As we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy Kingdom come,” which means “The kingdom of God certainly comes of itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.”⁴ For this, Christ’s Kingdom, to “come to us also,”

II. He Is to Be Preached and Received in True Repentance

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” was John’s message. “These words of John will be repeated by Jesus in [Matthew] 4:17 [when he comes out of the wilderness after his temptation there], and in [Matthew] 10:7 Jesus will commission his disciples to proclaim, [‘The kingdom of heaven is near!’ (ESV)].” The whole point of Jesus’ coming was to bring the world to repentance.

“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance,” said Jesus of his purpose (Luke 5:32, ESV). And later, he declared, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and

⁴ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), 31-39, 33.

forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46-47, ESV). If this is the whole point, then we ought to understand what repentance means.

There would seem to be a paradox in this section of Matthew’s Gospel, in that John calls for repentance, and then the people come and are baptized “as they confessed their sins,” which is certainly part of repentance. But he also says, “I baptize you with water *for* repentance,” that is, “leading to” repentance. So what’s the order of events? Where does repentance fall?

Commonly as Christians we think of repentance as “acknowledging our sins with heartfelt shame and sorrow, confessing them sincerely before God, and seeking by faith His grace in Christ.”⁵ We picture what we do at the beginning of the church service, confessing our sins and asking for grace and forgiveness. This is not incorrect, but it also means much more. Our repentance each week (which should be each *day*), is the ongoing effect of the great repentance which we received once. Repentance is conversion. It is the full turning from one path – the path of destruction – to another – the path of righteousness. It is an about-face. John was proclaiming repentance, because the people were propelling themselves off the ledge and into the abyss. He preached and baptized to pull people back from the brink: they stood condemned, and he sought to turn them back in conversion to true faith in the God whom they’d forsaken.

⁵ *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001), q. 295.

This is the thing we *all* need. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:1-2, 4-5, ESV). True repentance is the change from death to life. True repentance is the change from damnation to salvation. True repentance is the change from unbelief to faith. “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching” (Rom. 10:13-14, ESV). Therefore,

true repentance – the turning away from sin and unbelief and toward God in faith – comes by the Word of God, the end-time proclamation of the reigning activity that God is now beginning in Jesus. Thus John’s preaching produces repentance.... That repentance continues to be expressed by the people confessing their sins when they are baptized with John’s baptism.... Moreover, the gift that is John’s baptism also produces ongoing repentance and faith in the One whom John is announcing.⁶

With the people around John, then, repentance is caused, produced, by his preaching, and that is enough for salvation. It manifests itself in confession, for, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And further, it is continued and additionally produced by baptism. Repentance is the cycle of the believer on earth. While on this earth we are,

⁶ Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*. 154.

as the church fathers described us, *simul iustus et peccator* – simultaneously saint and sinner. We are saints, because of repentance, bringing us out of death into life, out of sin into righteousness: Christ's righteousness. But we are sinners, because this body of death still clings to us. Therefore, on earth, we are like Paul, who said, "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:22-24, ESV). And as he also said, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor. 10:8-9).

Repentance is the work of Christ given to us. After all, we were dead. How could we turn ourselves? We had to *be* turned. And this is why Paul also wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," that is, the Gospel is God's working, God's reigning, God's kingdom, which brings salvation to all who believe, for "in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith,'" and we may rightly add as Luther did, "by faith *alone*" (Rom. 1:16, 17, ESV). God's grace is sufficient, the grace which brings repentance, instills faith, which holds to that repentance and salvation, and, further, which "produce[s] fruit in keeping with repentance." These fruits include continuing to seek out the grace of God which he gives freely, rather than relying on self-centered things. These fruits also include the works that faith necessarily will do, as James wrote, "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26, ESV).

Indeed, as Luther declared, “We say that justification is effective without works, not that faith is without works. For that faith which lacks fruit is not an efficacious but a feigned faith.... It is one thing that faith justifies without works; it is another thing that faith exists without works.”⁷ This has been paraphrased throughout the centuries: “Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone.” Therefore, a true faith, received in repentance, will “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” That is, the tree will grow, bear fruit, and look alive. It is dead trees that are thrown into the fire. But living trees, which show themselves to be living by their fruit and foliage, are gathered into life. It is not that we have *earned* our way into life, but that the life that has been *given* to us by the crucified and risen Christ in his Word and Sacraments shows itself in this: we love our neighbor, sharing with them the same Word above all, but caring also for their bodily needs; and we fear and love God above all things, which means, first and foremost, that we seek from him the blessings he promises to us, which are promised clearly in the Word, Baptism, and his Supper. We must seek these things as often as we possibly can, because they are the promissory of our eternal life, which is brought to us fully when this fulfillment, which has begun, comes to an end.

Amen.

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⁷ LW 34:176.