

“...As A Bag of Rocks”

Matthew 3:1-12

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Whether it's a theme park, a zoo, a museum, or any other tourist spot around the country, the one thing that inexplicably exists in all of their gift shops is display that lets you bring home your own custom, colorful, magnetic, or plain old bag of rocks. Talk about seemingly insignificant! They usually aren't even local rocks. They're just commercial, prepackaged rocks that they dump out into a wooden display and sell them for \$10 a bag, as many as your kid can jam into that little black felt pouch. And, from our parental view at least, that's the dumbest waste of money one could possibly choose. I mean, just think about how we use that as an insult most of the time when we call someone, “As dumb as a bag of rocks.” But, from a child's point of view, it's a great gift that they can't wait to take home (unless you're Charlie Brown on Halloween). The point being that something seemingly insignificant and worthless, like a dumb bag of rocks, can be incredibly valuable and important if it is made to be so.

Take the Pharisees and Sadducees in our text this morning. They are coming to John for baptism without knowing (or caring) why they were doing it. John speaks to them calling them poisonous snakes who pollute the truth of the Law, and as the people whom they teach begin to follow another, they have to make sure they assert their status into the mix. They seek to take baptism unto themselves as their birthright, as if they are owed the washing that the Baptizer is giving and proclaiming. John shuts that part down, too. Their birthright is worthless! Even as worthless as the stones that lay about the edge of the river. Any claim they make to be the children of Abraham means nothing, for the all-powerful God has the power to make children of Abraham from even the stones of the ground. John is essentially calling them “as dumb as a bag of rocks.” Nothing they have done makes them children of Abraham. For only faith can do such a thing, and very specifically, faith in the one for whom John prepares the way—the promised seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, our Lord—and the Lord gives faith to whom He wills.

The message that John proclaims to the people is one of repentance to point people to the promised forgiveness that is to come in the Christ, who is far mightier than he ever could be. The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted nothing to do with a man calling them of all people to repent. After all, they are the keepers of the Law, and no one has the right to correct or rebuke them. But nevertheless, John does so, and he does so in a very direct manner. “You brood of vipers,” he says to them. How dare they bring their poisonous self-righteousness among the people to whom he is proclaiming Christ the Lord. He

minces no words, calling them out for their fallacies in their teaching and their failures according to the Law. The Lord is unhappy with them and with all who will reject the Messiah. So much so, that the Lord's axe waits at the root of the trees, preparing to cut them down and cast them into the fire.

By their failure to understand the promise of the Messiah and willingness to reject Him, they will no longer be God's chosen people, for they no longer bear good fruit. There is a cautionary tale for the modern church in this account of John's rebuke of the leaders of Israel. They have abandoned the truth of God's Word and have neglected the means of grace by proclaiming them to be their own works of righteousness. And that is what we see running rampant throughout the world today. So-called "preachers" no longer maintain the proper distinction between Law and Gospel and fail to proclaim the truth of our salvation in Jesus Christ. They have become money launderers who clean their money through the church's bank accounts instead of proclaiming the repentance which the Baptizer proclaims that points us only and always to Jesus. Christ has become secondary to their desire to pad their wallets and be celebrities in the religious circles in which they run. And don't even mention the Holy Sacraments to them, because even if they know what they are, they misuse, abuse, or claim them unimportant to the people in their so-called "churches."

Melding the church into society is nothing more than acting as a brood of vipers, spilling poisonous venom into the place where the Lord seeks to gather His wheat into the barn. This is why we hold so tightly to the promises of God and to them alone. He has promised to be present for us in the Word and His instituted Holy Sacraments, and so that is where we go to find Him and the answers to our every need. John promised a baptism of repentance, and in doing so he was exercising the office of the keys which have been given to Christ's church. The keys to unlock or close the kingdom of heaven are not used to open doors into the psyche of the members and be self-help gurus that bring people joy and prosperity in this life. The keys to the kingdom are confession of sins, and always the absolution which follows for those who are in the faith. Here in this place, we will always find the forgiveness of sins that is promised through our Lord Jesus Christ, and we find those things not in the promises and deeds of man, but in the promises and deeds of the one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie.

John says that he baptizes with water and that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Despite the pervasive demonic idea that this means that people will receive the Holy Spirit in charismatic outbursts and that this is the fire John speaks about is absolute heretical nonsense. John has only the call to baptize for repentance. He calls people to look to the promise of the forgiveness which Jesus will

bring, and then Jesus will give them the Holy Spirit in the baptism that He institutes as His ministry comes to an end. And this makes perfect sense. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The whole point here is the fact of what we confess in the Nicene Creed. Christ baptizing with the Holy Spirit is about the reality that the One from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds is the one doing the baptizing and instituting the Sacrament of Baptism. Just look at the Scripture if you have any question about it. John 20:22, after His resurrection, “And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” And this gift of the Holy Spirit is about nothing more than repentance and forgiveness.

John then answers the question for us of what the fire is as well. It is an unquenchable fire that burns up the chaff after the wheat has been separated in the barn. This is judgment—final judgment—and Jesus is the final judge who will send those who deny Him into the eternal lake of fire. Those are the ones who in the final judgment have to stand before the Lord of all things just like the Pharisees and Sadducees “as dumb as a bag of rocks” for their denial of the one true God and His gracious gifts that He sought to bring to all people. Thanks be to God that we have been claimed as God’s own dear children in the baptismal waters of His grace. He has gathered us into the safety of His barn and has promised us eternal life through His dear Son, and that treasure is one that is ours only for His sake. We must and will continue to find Him where He has told us He is found, and in the word and water of baptism, the preaching of the Gospel, and in the body and blood of our Lord in, with, and under the bread and wine, we can always find Him and the forgiveness that He has won for us in His death on the cross.

Very often we are “as dumb as a bag of rocks” when it comes to our life of faith. It is our constant temptation to insert ourselves into the equation in whatever way possible, because our sinful nature simply can’t allow itself to be excluded. But that is no different than what the religious leaders in our Gospel lesson were doing. They did not seek repentance, but only elevation of themselves above others, and a false security in their perceived self-righteousness. There are not factions of righteousness within the people of God as they would have everyone believe. There is not one group of people that far exceeds the righteous potential of another as the Jews held to be true over the Gentiles. Paul puts that to rest for us in our Epistle lesson, where he adjures us all to “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” And that is the point the Baptizer makes in our Gospel lesson. All are welcome in the waters of baptism, no matter their ethnicity, because the children of Abraham are not a nation, they are made by God through faith, whether they are stones on the bank of the river, or those who were gathered neatly in a gift bag.

The point of all of it—John’s baptism and the baptism that Jesus brings—is that it points us to the truth of the Messiah. It points us to praise the one who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as John will proclaim when He baptizes our Lord. Psalm 95:1 says, “Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.” Jesus is the rock to whom we look for salvation. We look to Him for all things, because He has given us all things. He richly and daily provides for us, and has given us His Holy Spirit in the water of baptism. And as stones who have been made to be children of Abraham, we rejoice in the knowledge of His forgiveness and we do as the Baptizer proclaims and we “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (v. 2).” As we wait for the Advent of our Lord when He comes again in glory, we preach the Word of repentance and the Gospel of forgiveness. We receive the gift of forgiveness by the water of Baptism, and by His body and blood in His Holy Supper. The feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which shall have no end is what awaits us in the eschaton, and until that day we look with longing eyes to heaven, proclaiming the truth that He has come in the flesh, and will return to bring us home to the light of His glory for all eternity. Amen.