

[*POUND! POUND! POUND!*] “Open up! Police!” Alex knew something was about to happen—from the sound of things, it was bad; very, very bad. Fear paralyzed him completely. Sweat came out of every pore—his mouth went dry—he trembled from head to toe. Something bad was definitely about to happen.

[*POUND! POUND! POUND!*] “We know you’re in there. Come out with your hands up, before we break down the door.” Alex dived under the dining room table, hiding behind the chairs. He held his breath, trying hard not to make a noise. “Maybe they’ll go away,” he thought. “But what if they don’t—then this is it!”

He’d always dreaded this day—the day his whole past would finally catch up to him. Could it be that modern forensics had discovered that it was him who had stolen that pack of baseball cards when he was a kid all those years ago? Could it be that computer tracking and internet history helped the FBI link all those pirated music and movie downloads back to him, and because they were too busy chasing terrorists they had handed off the case to local authorities? Could it be that they’d found the remains of that joint he’d tried with some friends back in college, and the evidence still had his fingerprints all over it? It could be any of those things—or worse, it could be all of those things. Maybe more even. Perhaps they’d been building a big case against him—compiling one crime after another, until finally they had enough to put him away for a long, long time.

[*POUND! POUND! POUND!*] “This is your final warning! We’re coming in!” Alex gulped. “Maybe if I show them I’m really, really sorry,” he thought, “then maybe, just maybe they’ll see I’ve learned my lesson. Maybe if I can make them believe I’ll be a good boy from now on, be on my best behavior, they’ll go away and leave me alone.” In an instant, he turned on the waterworks—tears flowing freely, his nose running like a faucet, his voice blubbing with phlegm. It was his best shot—his only shot—at escaping punishment. Just before they were about to kick in the door, Alex turned the knob.

Something’s about to happen—are *you* ready? Two thousand years ago, John the Baptist would’ve put that very question to you. See, the time was coming for the Old Testament to become the New—finally, the long-promised Messiah, God’s Anointed, would soon be banging down our doors. And it was John’s job to get everyone ready. John was that voice crying in the wilderness—“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” He was the one who “appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. “And [he had] all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem . . . going out to him and . . . being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Something’s about to happen, said John, so you’d better get ready!

Now, you and I know, while Advent is about getting ready for Christmas and all, it’s about much more than that. After all, for twenty-first century people like us, it can’t be just about throwing Jesus a big birthday bash. No, for you and me, Jesus is coming back again—this time, for good—so we need to be on the lookout! And that’s why the Church gives us Advent, this annual reminder that, just as sure as Christ came beating down our doors the first time, He will return a second time. Even now, two thousand years later, that voice is still crying in the wilderness—*our* wilderness—“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” Something’s about to happen—any day, any minute, any second now—will *you* be ready?

Just *how* you get ready says a lot about what you think’s about to happen. No doubt, there were some who stood on the Jordan’s muddy banks, hearing John’s message of repentance the same way Alex heard the police pounding at his door. They translated it the same way I translated my Mother’s words, “Just wait till your Father comes home.” My Father’s homecoming should’ve been something to look forward to, but instead there were times when I dreaded it. I just knew that as soon as he heard the report of my shenanigans, I was really gonna get it. So, there these folks are, from Jerusalem and Judea, listening to John tell them that something bad—something very, very bad—was about to happen.

And it makes sense when you think about it. I mean, this is the Lord we’re talkin’ about! This is the same guy who says, “Vengeance is mine!” The same guy who says His fiery wrath is quickly kindled. The very same guy of whom it is said, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” So, if you know somebody like that is coming to pay you a visit,

when you hear John say “Repent!” you better believe you’re gonna go splashing into that water, confessing every sin you can think of, crying your eyes out, hoping that after seeing how sorry you are, the Lord just might go easy on you. Something bad—something *very, very bad*—is coming—by golly, you better be ready!

There are some of us here who no doubt translate the word *repent* this same way. Maybe when you knelt for Confession this morning. Maybe when you had a question of conscience this week. Maybe when you think of death and dying and standing before the judgment seat. “Something bad’s about to happen,” you said to yourself, “Father’ll be home any time now—I’d better get ready!”

But what if that’s not what the word *repent* means at all? What if we’ve got John’s message all mistranslated? Take our Old Testament Reading today, for example, Isaiah chapter 40, which is where Mark gets his whole “a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord” business from in today’s Gospel. Flip back in your bulletin to page 5, and look at how before and after those verses about that voice crying in the wilderness, you’ll find that Isaiah tells us just what it is John’s got us preparing for. See how it says at verse 1, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned*”? Then, turn toward the end of the reading, and you’ll find it finishes this way, “*fear not; say to the cities of Judah ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord God comes . . . He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom*”. Sounds like something’s about to happen alright—but does that sound to you like something very, very bad? . . . Or something very, very good?

What a shock it must’ve been to those who’d mistranslated John’s message of repentance. But then again, I’m not sure anything could’ve really prepared *anyone* for just what *was* about to happen. I mean, when the Lord God does beat down their doors, He comes joining the ranks of sinners, Jesus humbly stands in line to be baptized. Even John’s caught off guard by this, saying, “Lord, I should be baptized by You, and You come to me?” And just look at the way He tends His flock like a shepherd—when Jesus comes across tax collectors and prostitutes, He doesn’t raise a fist against them but welcomes them with open arms. And how He gathers the lambs in His arms—when He sees the unclean, the diseased and the deceased, Jesus doesn’t hold them at arm’s length but pulls them in close. But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is this—His cross. Arms stretched out, drawing all people to Himself, laying down His life for the sheep, the Good Shepherd carries them in His bosom. Taking a sinner’s place, dying a sinner’s death, Jesus carries sinners from death to life—or as Isaiah puts it, puts an end to our warfare, pardons our iniquity. Something was about to happen, something had happened—something very, very good!

And as we get ready for what’s about to happen again, as we await our Lord’s return, how are we to hear John’s message? Is John like some street preacher, standing on a soap box, holding up a sign, “Repent! The Kingdom is nigh!” Or is John more like some excited messenger boy who can’t wait to share the good news—“Repent! The kingdom’s nearly here!” If any of us have been translating *repent* as “Just wait till your Father gets home,” we’ve got it all wrong. After all, we’ve seen that’s not why our Lord shows up in the first place—no, He comes to tend His flock like a shepherd; gather the lambs in His arms; carry them in His bosom—to put an end to our warfare and to pardon our iniquity. And that’s what we’re getting ready for, that’s what is meant by *repent*.

See, *repent* literally means “to turn around,” “to make a complete 180,” “to switch directions altogether.” It is John’s way of saying, that a new world order is coming, that God’s kingdom is breaking open, and our old way of life is coming to an end. Compare what God has in store to the ugly gaping wounds left by sin and death on our planet, our loved ones, on ourselves, and you can’t help but hear that as good news! See, *repent* means you and I are moving away from such awful things, heading toward God’s future, ready for it to sweep us away. Banging down our door is love’s warm embrace, the undying spark of everlasting life, the goodness, and truth, and beauty of heaven—it’s all replacing this outdated existence. And when we repent, when we turn around and hold dear those things of God, His future is made present, and His kingdom now comes among us. Repentance is simply daring to enjoy now the wonderful plans God has for us.

[*Cre-e-ak!*] Slowly, Alex opened the door. Through the crack, he didn’t find any squad cars, he didn’t see any boys in blue. No, what he discovered was a group of familiar faces, excited eyes and eager smiles lighting up his world, and

12.10.2017
Second Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Rev. David V. Miller
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

suddenly he felt foolish. “Ha! I got you man!” chuckled one of his buddies, “You actually thought we were the police? Ha, ha, ha!” “Surprise!” shouted another. “Happy birthday!” everyone erupted in unison.

Alex wiped his face on his sleeve, and laughed at himself—he had nearly forgotten it was his birthday. Yet, here were his friends, cake in hand and presents in tow. In that moment, a heavy weight was lifted, and Alex’s heart took flight. Something was about to happen, something had happened—something very, very good. And if he had only known, he could’ve enjoyed it sooner, he could’ve embraced what was coming—he could’ve been ready with his door wide open.