

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's the day before Christmas Eve, and many of us find ourselves plagued by the feeling or concern that we've forgotten something in all our preparations. Though we're probably not aware, for all our shopping and cookie making, for all our list and menu planning, ***we have forgotten a child.***

Tomorrow night we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, God coming to be among us to redeem us from the power of sin, death and the devil, and ***most of us feel we are prepared, aside from last minute details. But are we?***

On this fourth Sunday in Advent – so close to the coming of God's arrival among us – ***Scripture will not let us forget that God's first Advent among humanity doesn't begin with the child, Jesus. God's arrival among us begins with two women carrying two children of promise.***

The first, an old woman – whose child will call many to repentance – who has lived in obedience and righteousness all her days. ***Elizabeth carries in her womb the call to repentance.***

The second, a virgin – whose child shall give himself to bring us back into relationship with His Father – who will live as a servant of the LORD. ***Mary carries in her womb the promise of God with us.***

These two children – John and Jesus, repentance and

redemption – are inseparable; *their lives intertwined inextricably, unable to be taken separately.*

God's work to restore a lost humanity into relationship with God's self *begins not with the birth of this child in Bethlehem, but in the birth of another – the child who leaps in Elizabeth's womb – the one who calls God's people back through repentance.* John – the child so easily forgotten – *calls all of us who have turned our backs to God, to turn back and seek God again.* Because you see, God has not turned away from us, we have turned away from God.

Without a doubt, the second child is greater than the first. Yet, *without the child of repentance no one can receive the child who redeems.* As he leaps in Elizabeth's womb at Mary and Jesus' presence, **John reminds us this morning that must come first.**

God's arrival among us – to be Emmanuel, God with us – is born in the promise of repentance, turning back to God, but the greater blessing is the promise of God in Christ that Jesus will meet us in person and dwell with us in our lives.

God's great work of redemption begins with an old man and an old woman, barren, full of lost hopes and dreams.

God's great work of redemption doesn't begin in a stable with a birth and a child laid in a manger. God's coming begins in the

Temple with a priest from the line of Aaron – Zechariah – whose wife Elizabeth Mary visits today.

God's advent – God's arrival to be with humanity – begins not with new expressions of worship, but with ancient ritual – the burning incense in the temple in Jerusalem.

Christ's coming begins not with certainty, but with doubt as Zechariah doubts the possibility that he and Elizabeth can have a child.

So it seems that the Christ can come to us when our hopes and dreams have died, in the place where God has been worshipped for years through a priesthood which faithfully carries out its duties in worship, through repentance and turning back to God for we have turned our own way, and even without certainty for God wants us to know us and be known by us.

So this story of Christ's coming can begin for each one of us today, each day.

The birth of the second child, Jesus, is the source of great joy and celebration; while the birth of the first child, John, is the lesser joy. For even at John's birth, the second child's coming is heralded:

“You my child shall be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare HIS ways.”

The second child, Jesus, is heralded as the one who will:

“give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercies of God, with which the Sunrise from on High shall break upon us to shine on those sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This is not theology. This is reality. In the second child we are promised the opportunity to know the Father through Christ. Not know about Christ, but know Him, speak to Him, be heard by Him, and in the silence of our hearts and lives hear and feel his guiding, his forgiveness, His presence even and especially in the darkest places, and to know peace in His presence. The second child will come to dwell with us, each one of us, but we must make room for him, and making room for Jesus means responding to John's call to repent of being masters of our own lives.

We see this pattern in our lives of faith as again and again we despair of our ability to handle life, and turn to Jesus for help. We see this pattern in our worship, where we always begin with confession and forgiveness, only to be met with Jesus' words and His Body and Blood.

If we want to feel the joy and freedom of redemption through the child Jesus, we must make room for Him by repenting of all those things, people, addictions, obsessions, and even holiday preparations that fill up the center of our lives.

Yes, perhaps we have forgotten a child in all our Christmas preparations, but there is still time to greet this child with repentance, and so open our hearts so that the Christ Child can come to us, fill us, and lead us into the way of peace.

Amen !!!