

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Just this past Tuesday, December 2, 2025, the news raced around the world like a warning siren: a Cessna 208 Grand Caravan, painted with the Samaritan's Purse logo, was hijacked right after takeoff from Juba, the capital of South Sudan. This little turboprop was loaded with medical supplies: bandages, vaccines, life-saving kits, headed to the remote village of Maiwut, where kids were dying from hunger and disease in the flood-soaked northeast. A desperate man named Yasir Mohammed Yusuf, from the disputed oil lands of Abyei, had snuck into the back cargo hold. When the plane was airborne, he jumped out with a pistol, pointed it at the pilot, and shouted, "Fly me to Chad, now!" He wanted to escape the fighting, the floods, the endless wrath of war. The pilot stayed steady, circled for hours, then said, "We need fuel," and landed at Wau Airport. Police and ground crew swarmed in, talked him down gently, and took him into custody. No shots fired. No one hurt. The medical boxes were unloaded safe and sound, and by evening, they were on their way to the sick children who needed them most.

That hijacker thought rescue was his to steal, with a gun and a stolen seat on someone else's wings. He was running from wrath, but he almost wrecked the real mercy already on board. Friends, isn't that our story too? That's exactly what the Holy Gospel shouts to us this morning. A wild desert preacher is hollering about a hijacking deep in our hearts, and about the only Rescue who lets Himself be hijacked by our mess so we can fly free.

Picture the dusty banks of the Jordan River. The sun scorches the ground. Out of the rocky wilderness stomps a man in a scratchy camel-hair coat, leather belt cinched tight, munching on locusts and wild honey like it's a feast. And he has one message he won't quit yelling:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2 ESV)

John the Baptist is like that calm pilot on Tuesday, yelling into our headsets, "Wrong heading! Turn around, the King's flight is coming in!"

Think of a farmer who gets word the king is riding down the dirt road to his homestead. He snatches up his axe, hacks down every withered tree, hauls off the rubbish heaps, torches the tangled thorns, and levels the bumps. That's John's job, only the road isn't gravel or mud. It's the winding path of your heart and mine. And the junk blocking the way? It's our sin: the sharp words we spit, the secret greed

we hug, the cold shoulders we give to God and neighbor, the lazy drifts away from what's right.

John grabs one powerful Greek word to shake us: metanoia. We hear "repent," but metanoia means a hard, full 180-degree spin in your thinking and doing. It's the hijacker in that Cessna cargo hold realizing mid-air, "This isn't my ride, I'm wrecking the help for others," dropping the pistol, and letting the pilot land safe. It's your heart slamming the throttle, banking sharp away from the cliff of self-rule, toward the mercy airstrip God has waiting.

John says the King barreling down that road is so mighty that John isn't fit to lug His sandals, the grunt work of the lowliest foot soldier in a Roman legion. No pistol-waving rebel can reroute this King. He charts the true course.

Now the tension climbs, engines whining like that Cessna buzzing low over Wau. Folks stream from the cities, plain sinners like fishermen and tax cheats, rough soldiers with callused hands. And then slink in the polished ones: Pharisees and Sadducees, the scroll-keepers who could rattle off the Law like a shopping list. They waded up smug, figuring a quick splash in the Jordan will stamp their "good enough" card.

John locks eyes and bellows, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7) A brood of vipers? That's a wriggling nest of baby snakes, innocent-looking coils that strike with venom. John's saying, "You dress holy, but inside you're coiled to poison anything good." Don't puff up and mutter, "Abraham's our dad, that's ticket enough." God can spark kids for Abraham right out of these river rocks. Being born in a Christian home, raised on Bible stories, doesn't punch your boarding pass any more than hailing from Abyei gave that gunman the right to hijack mercy meant for Maiwut's little ones.

Then John sketches two scenes that grip your gut like turbulence.

First: An axe rests sharp at the roots of the trees. Every one failing to drop good fruit, chop!, down it goes, hauled off to the flames. (Matthew 3:10)

Second: The harvester stands on the threshing floor, winnowing fork in hand. He flings the wheat skyward. The heavy kernels plop back golden; the worthless chaff dances off on the breeze, raked into a blaze that never quits. "His winnowing fork is in his hand... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12)

Can you feel the blade's edge? Smell the acrid smoke? Hear the whoosh of wind sorting life from trash? It's that Cessna dipping low, fuel gauge flickering red, the gunman's demands echoing in the cockpit. Wrath is real, like the border skirmishes that pushed Yasir to hide in the hold. John's not cozying us up; he's the ground control flashing, "Mayday, turn now or crash!"

But hold on, right as the fear peaks, props straining, the One gripping that axe and fork strides right into the tale. Jesus, the Judge, the Harvester, wades into the muddy Jordan and tells John, "Baptize Me." The sinless King lines up with the likes of us. The holy Pilot lets plain river water splash over His face.

Why? To shoulder the chop we earned, the blaze we stoked. On the cross, the axe swings, into His trunk. The fire roars, around His cross. The hijacker's debt, our venom strikes, the chaff of our failures, He takes the full hit, so the medical mercy gets through to us.

And here's the second Greek gem that flips the script: baptizō. Straight up, it means "to add water." Picture dumping a bucket of fresh, cool water over a dust-caked traveler stumbling in from the desert, or drenching a cracked-up field so green shoots can burst free. Jesus adds water, adds His own spotless self, to our guilt, our death spiral, our hijacked lives. So when water is added to us in Holy Baptism, it's not just a rinse. It's His forgiveness flooding in, His life pumping through our veins, His rescue cargo unloading straight into our empty holds.

That gunman figured salvation was a solo flight he had to force. Jesus whispers, "No, salvation is Me added to you, poured out free, landing gentle no matter the storm."

So here's John's masterstroke this morning. He strapped us into that bucking Cessna, flashed the axe's gleam, fanned the fire's heat, and then swung the door wide to Jesus, dripping in the Jordan, arms out: "I flew your route. I took the bullet. I added the water that washes clean. Climb aboard, live."

The doomed trees? Grafted to Christ, they bud and drop sweet fruit, love that shares, joy that sticks through storms, peace that calms a hijacked heart. The chaff headed for the burn? Blown off forever; the true grain is scooped up, stored eternal in the Father's unbreakable silo.

For us, the desert cry still echoes: "Repent, bank hard, kingdom's touching down!" The King towers beyond our dreams. He still adds water laced with Holy Spirit and refining fire, not to torch us, but to scour out the junk and ignite His glow within.

Jesus shouldered your wrath on Calvary's hill. He hauled your sins to the Jordan's depths and held them under till they drowned. He broke the surface soaked and soaring, wrapping you now in His robe of righteousness, purer than that white Cessna gleaming against the blue, brighter than Maiwut's kids clutching their first full meal.

The axe? Sheathed in His victory. The fork? Done sorting, your sin scattered, you treasured safe. The blaze? It raged on Good Friday, and from its embers rose your unbreakable, forever life in Him.

That, beloved children of God, is the headline sweeter than any newsflash. The King has touched down, not to ground you, but to fuel you for the endless sky. And soon, oh soon, He'll swing low again to scoop you up for the great homecoming feast, where every table groans with joy and the flights of grace never end.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in Him.

Pastor Ron Breight Christ Lutheran Church Forest Hills, Pennsylvania

Join us for worship online on our Facebook page, [ChristLutheranChurchfh](#). There you can view our 10 am Sunday service live or view a recording at your convenience. There is no need to register with Facebook or log in to visit our page.