

Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2006
Luke 3:7-18

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

John the Baptist Explains His Call to Repentance

1. Repentance is urgently needed
2. Repentance produces fruits

NIV Luke 3:7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. ¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-- be content with your pay."

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Dear Christian Friends,

He makes an appearance each Advent, John the Baptist does. While we're knee-deep in tinsel and tiny lights, here comes this fellow in a rough camel's hair coat with his jarring call to repent. John said many other things, but the word most closely associated with him is *repent*.

But what does it mean to repent? The word the New Testament writers frequently use for repentance means to have a change of mind. This is not simply a cosmetic change, a bit of superficial rearranging of our thinking, but a great inner transformation brought about by the terrifying realization that our sins

have marked us for eternal condemnation, combined with a reliance on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. John's work was a necessary prelude to the coming of Christ because unrepentant people see no need for Jesus to be their Savior. They either don't admit their sins or they aren't bothered by their consequences.

So this morning, a week before we visit the Savior's manger, let's go out to the Jordan River so that John can remind us why the coming of our Lord in human flesh is so important. John explains his call to repentance today by making it clear 1) that repentance is urgently needed, and 2) that repentance produces fruits.

1. Repentance is urgently needed

"Laid back" is not what comes to mind when I think of John the Baptist. As we listen to him preaching out there at the Jordan there is a fierce sense of urgency to his message. He says to the crowds coming out to be baptized, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath.*" Isn't that an interesting way of getting people ready for the coming the Light of the world, the One through whom God's grace and truth would be revealed? John speaks not of coming grace but of coming *wrath*. But wrath and grace are the opposite sides of the same coin. By God's grace Jesus was coming to rescue us from the coming wrath, but those who believe they don't need for Jesus and reject him would have only God's wrath to look forward to.

What John says here reminds me of a summer night a few years ago, before we had a road and a school to the east of us. A grass fire started about ten o'clock in the evening. A neighbor came and pounded on our door, saying that our church was on fire. Thankfully it turned out not to be the church, but the dry grass next to the church. I went over to see what was happening and as I got closer I could see little animals running from the flames. I didn't see any snakes trying to escape the flames that night, but there were plenty of mice running from the flames.

John uses another illustration of the urgency of repentance. He says, "*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*" The picture is of a non-productive tree in an orchard, dead perhaps, or under-producing. That tree is about to be felled. God has laid his ax at the root of that fruitless tree. He's ready to start chopping.

And in another illustration, John portrays Jesus. This time, though, not Jesus the Good Shepherd, or Jesus blessing little children, but Jesus with a winnowing fork in his hand. Jesus is getting ready to clear his threshing floor, he's going to toss the threshed wheat into the air so that the wind can separate the valuable wheat from the worthless chaff. The chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire, but the wheat will be gathered into God's barn.

That's where I want to be when this life is over. You, too, right? Not thrown into the fire but gathered into God's granary—heaven. And Jesus has come and done everything necessary for us to go to heaven. He took our sins upon himself, took them to the cross and thus took them away from us forever. By rising from the grave Jesus has declared us not guilty. Those who trust in Jesus are no longer lying, treacherous snakes in God's sight, but cleansed by the blood of the Lamb we are God's children. The apostle John said about Jesus, **“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”**

As I think back to that night a few years ago when the neighbor lady pounded on our door and yelled that our church was on fire, it seems to me that John the Baptist was doing much the same thing out there at the Jordan. If he comes across as fierce and stern, it's because he sees the danger that his hearers aren't seeing. He wants all those who have not repented to hear that their house is on fire. Their souls are in imminent, mortal danger. But it's not too late. There's still time. There is one coming who is so much greater than John that John isn't worthy to do the servant's work of untying the thongs of his sandals. John was a mighty prophet but Jesus is the mighty God. He promises to rescue all who repent of their sins and trust in him.

But it seems that not all of those coming out to the Jordan where John was baptizing were coming because they were truly repentant. For some the excursion to the desert may have been prompted by curiosity. Word was spreading that there was a prophet out there in the desert. “You going out to see him?” “I'll go with you!” But real repentance isn't a passing fad. True repentance penetrates heart and soul and mind—and it produces fruits that demonstrate repentance.

2. Repentance produces fruits

When John saw the crowds coming out to be baptized, he said, *“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”* Repentance that produces no fruits is no repentance. Real repentance (true sorrow for sin and trust in Jesus) will always bear fruits.

After John said these things, people wanted to know what the fruits of repentance were. John said to the whole crowd, *“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”* A tunic was like a long undershirt. It wasn't an absolutely essential piece of clothing, but it was a common piece of clothing that would have provided extra warmth when the temperature took a dive out there in the desert. And there were likely some in that crowd that hadn't brought a sufficient supply of food. John instructs that one fruit of repentance might be to share extra clothing and extra food with those who have none. The apostle John said much the same thing in his first letter: **“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”** (1 John 3:17) Real

repentance is not simply a matter of words of the tongue, but of actions and truth.

Then some tax collectors asked John how his call to bring forth the fruits of repentance applied to them. He answered, "*Don't collect any more than you are required to.*" Tax collectors commonly *did* collect more than required, keeping the surplus for themselves. And John told the soldiers who came to him, "*Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay.*" Again, it was common for soldiers to use their authority and their weapons to enrich themselves by extorting money from people. And it was common for soldiers to grumble about their pay. You notice that John doesn't tell either the tax collectors or the soldiers to find another vocation. He simply instructs them to be honest and faithful as they go about their work.

What do you suppose John would have said if we could have asked him what to do? I am certain he would have told us to serve Jesus in whatever station we occupy in life. What the pitfalls at your place of work? Is it dishonesty? Laziness? Lack of contentment with your compensation that turns into grumbling and complaining? For that matter, what are the pitfalls and temptations of being a student or a retiree, a spouse or a parent or a child? Producing the fruits of repentance doesn't require a pilgrimage to a far away land or severe acts of self-denial. The fruits of repentance show up right where we live and work. When our lives are consistent with our words of repentance, then we don't need to live in fear of the approaching wrath.

But who does that perfectly? The inconsistency between what we believe and do, between what we intend to do and what we actually do, is a universal failing among Christians. Our desire to bring forth the fruits of repentance is opposed at every turn by our sinful nature. By God's grace we may see progress at living for him, but we never achieve perfection at living for him. So, what then? Will the approaching wrath of God consume us? Not as we continue confessing our sins and seeking refuge in the forgiveness Jesus offers us. "**If we confess our sins,**" the apostle John wrote, "**he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteous-ness.**" Jesus came to this earth so that by his death and resurrection he would be able to intercede for us, to speak to the Father in our defense. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world.

Preparing. That's what these final days before Christmas are about. Preparing for the children's Christmas service this afternoon. Preparing for guests. Preparing for the exchange of gifts and Christmas dinner. And then, into the midst of all our distractions and preoccupations comes this strange man, this prophet with the unusual clothes and the jarring message. He reminds us that there's one preparation that ranks far above all the others in importance. It's the preparing of our hearts as we realize the urgency of repentance and produce the fruits of repentance. Those who prepare by repenting are truly ready when Jesus comes. Amen.