

St. Paul Lutheran Church
Grant Park, Illinois
The Third Sunday in Advent, December 16, 2018
Luke 3:7-18

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? 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. The axe 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."

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 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."

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 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. 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." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Our gospel lesson last week introduced us to John the Baptist and his important message to repent. We heard how John calls us to have godly sorrow in our hearts over our sins, but to also trust in the forgiveness which Jesus has won for us. John's message to sorrow over sin, but to also trust in Jesus' forgiveness helps prepare us for Jesus' second coming into the world. This preparation flows into our gospel lesson this week where John instructs on how this preparation impacts our day to day lives.

We can see the way John transitions from the nonconcrete idea of repentance to the concrete idea of action in his interaction with the crowd who is listening to him. **“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? 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.”**

“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.” John's opening words are rather strong. He calls the people who are coming to him a brood of vipers. Do these words sound like a strange strategy to you? You're an important messenger and you're calling your audience a group of young and poisonous snakes? Is this really a good idea? Has John lost it?

The strong message has to do with the audience who John is addressing. The first people John addresses are the Jewish leaders who have come out to meet him. We don't see it in Luke's account, but Matthew records this fact for us. **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.’”**

“And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” Matthew makes it clear John is addressing the Jewish leaders, but what was the reason he was so harsh with them? It had to do with the way the Jewish leaders viewed themselves. John reveals their attitude when he says, **“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.”**

The Jewish leaders held themselves in high regard simply because they were Jewish. They believed since God had chosen their father Abraham and his descendants to be his chosen people that God would love them simply because they were Jews. Do you sense why God might not agree with their opinion about themselves? God doesn't call people his children because they are a certain nationality. He calls them his children because they love and follow what he has to say to them.

What can you and I take away from John's words to the Jewish leaders? One of the traps which sinful people often fall into is what I call the past experience problem. What do I mean when I say the past experience problem? It looks like this: Steve and Joan are members at church x. Their family has been lifelong members of the church. They've had positions of leadership. Steve has served as an elder and chairman of the congregation. Joan has served on the altar guild, ladies group and in Sunday School.

These are all good and wonderful ways to have served their church, but the last time either of them served was over 10 years ago and over the last 10 years their church attendance has gone from every

service to once every three or four months. An elder who is newer to the congregation goes and visits them to check in on them. Steve and Joan are very cordial. Joan references the past work which they had done.

The elder commends them on their past service, but he feels compelled to ask them some pointed questions. What about your life right now? Do you still long to hear your savior's voice? Do you rejoice at the thought of being able to go to worship and hear about his love for you? Does the thought of encouraging your fellow believers to keep up the good fight make your heart swell? Or are you satisfied with the past service you've put in and not overly concerned about your current spiritual health?

Suddenly John's words when he says, **"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."** take on a whole new meaning don't they? Christians can't claim to be Christians based solely on past experience. Christians need to continue to produce Christian fruit throughout their entire lives and not just at one point in their lives.

John has even stronger words for people who think that they can get by on old Christian fruit rather than keeping it fresh. **"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."** John minces no words. A tree which once was Christian, but no longer yields Christian fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fires of hell. What is the proper reaction to John's thunderous message?

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, 'The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.' Tax collectors also came to be baptized. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them. 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.'"

There are members of John's audience who are cut to the heart by his powerful message. What is the best way to produce fruit? John's message is simple and clear. The best way to produce fruit is by seizing the opportunities God gives you to show love and concern for your neighbors. John gives a few examples for his listeners. He instructs them to share with those in need. He wants them to be honest at work. He encourages them to be content with what they have.

Our congregation had a great example of what it means to share with those in need. A week and a half ago the egg farm had a major fire. The people of St. Paul saw a need and met it. We had people make sure the church was open, coffee was ready and doughnuts were purchased to give to those who were fighting the fire or were impacted by it. Did any of you question the generosity? Did you seek glory for it? No, because you saw an opportunity to produce fruit and seized it.

This is one great way to bear Christian fruit in our lives, but we will want to continue to heed John's call to bear Christian fruit. John calls on us to be honest. He is speaking to people about their work, but there is a great application for one's everyday life too. What is the reason God wants us to be honest?

Well, what is the reason people lie? Don't they think they will get ahead by lying? Or they will stay out of trouble when they lie?

God doesn't want you and me to be consumed by getting ahead in life. John's words to the tax collectors and soldiers remind us of this important truth. God wants us to be content with what he gives us because contentment means we will be satisfied in life rather than scheming about ways to cheat people and get the better of them. Or lying to get others in trouble so we look better. Contentment and honesty are two paths which bear Christian fruit.

Are these the reasons God will love us? Does he love us because we are generous, content and honest? **"The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 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.'"**

"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.' And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them." John's message produced a burning expectation in people's hearts, was John the savior and the way to God? John pointedly says no. Instead, he points to Jesus and the fact he is the one who makes people Christians.

John was just the messenger for the savior who pointed people to the savior. Jesus is the reason you and I are Christians. He has called us through the power of the Holy Spirit whom he has poured out on us to be his followers. Jesus is the one who gave his life in order for us to be called Christians. Jesus is the one who has called us into his family and Jesus is the one who we put our hope and confidence in. The reason we produce Christian fruit is because Jesus has called us to produce Christian fruit.

Our Christian fruit isn't the cause of our salvation, but just because it doesn't cause our salvation doesn't mean it is unimportant. Our Christian fruit is evidence of our salvation. It displays to the world we are Christ's followers. John has one last special promise for Christians who bear fruit. **"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn."** One day Jesus will gather his faithful followers who bore fruit their entire lives into his barn of heaven. Amen.