

What Then Should We Do?

JOY

December 16, 2018

Luke 3: 7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

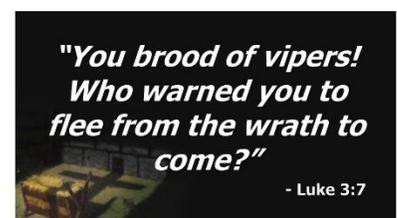
¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.



Our journey with John the Baptist continues today. Last week I spoke of how John was different and of how he challenged the status quo. John's message was to repent and to live right so that we are prepared for the coming Messiah. In our passage today, we hear John continuing to challenge the status quo of his day. Upon hearing the challenge hurled at the religious leaders – those who are supposed to be walking in faith – and others who have come out into the wilderness to take in the "side show", the crowd asks John, *"What then should we do?"* John's message evolves today as he begins to point to living like the Messiah even as we prepare for His birth at Christmas. Today, with John the Baptist, we begin to look at what the birth and life of Jesus means to our lives today. Let us pray...

One would think that if one was willing to go out into the desert to see John the Baptist, one was seeking to be baptized. One would hear about John's message of repentance and would go out already sympathetic to his message. These people are trying to do something religious. But believe it or not, sometimes people go to church for the wrong reasons. Sometimes people help a neighbor or a stranger in need for the wrong reasons. So, some people went out to see John. John knew that one could appear to be religious without actually being faithful to God or without being repentant of the sin in their lives. In our opening verses, we hear John's confrontational nature as he addresses those in the crowd whose hearts are far from God. In verse 7 John exhorts them, saying, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* He is not very polite. He is maybe a bit rude – confrontational at



the least. When John addresses some in the crowd as 'vipers' he is saying they are like the snakes that would latch onto whatever they bit, continuing to inject venom. In calling the religious leaders 'vipers', John is accusing them of injecting poison into the lives of the people and of sucking the joy out of their faith. They heap rules upon the people and condemn any new idea. They do not seek to bring the Gentiles to the faith; they are exclusionary. By contrast, John, like Jesus, calls all people to repentance, calls all people into the family of God. All are welcome in the kingdom of God.



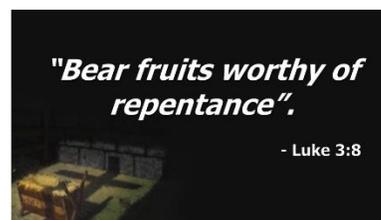
Even though this inclusiveness of God's love aligns with John's heart, John is not the "Jesus loves you, all is a bed of roses" type of preacher. John proclaims his warning to those in the crowd that need to hear this message. John knows the day is coming when God will pour out His wrath and indignation against sin and surely judgment will come. This is what John wanted his audience to be concerned with too - not whether or not they liked the preacher. For John, souls were more important than popularity. While this remains the main point that they teach at preacher school, there is this human part inside all of us that wants to be liked. Most of us do not like confrontation.

But in reality, we show our Christian love best when we say what needs to be said. It is certainly more comfortable to hear a "Jesus loves us all" sermon than it is to hear that the wrath is coming, so we had better repent! The reality is that we are called to hold each other accountable and to address sin in each other's lives when we see it. As a pastor I have never intentionally tried to do

this from the pulpit, but there have been numerous times over the years when I have given a message and then been asked: "Where you preaching just to me?" Sometimes the Spirit works through a message to bring insight or conviction or whatever it is that an individual may need. When this has happened, I truly believe that God was at work in the preparation and delivery of the message that day for that specific person as well as for the larger church.

As John challenged those in the audience that day, I am sure some thought that he was speaking just to them. John knew that true repentance would lead to a changed life. I think we can relate to this concept. When someone apologizes for something and turns right around and does the same thing, what do we think? We think that was a pretty insincere apology, don't we? John saw people coming for repentance and then going back and living the same life of sin.

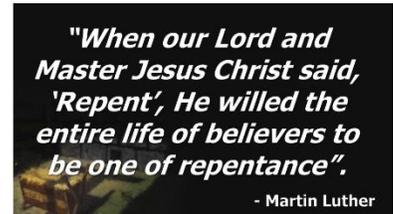
Accordingly, John said to the vipers, "*Bear fruits worthy of repentance*". Go and live your life like we can tell you are a child of God. John is confronting his audience about the quality of their lives. Today, we might say that one cannot be in church singing like a choir boy on Sunday morning and then live the rest of the week like a roughneck sailor.



Because God has shown John the condition of their hearts, John goes on to warn them that "*the ax is lying at the root of the tree*". This warning is aimed at the core of the faith, the religious institution that is the Jewish faith. I can envision John eying a few Pharisees and Sadducees as he makes this statement. John broadens the application some as he continues, warning that "*every tree*

therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”.

This was a warning to his audience and to every Christian who hears these words. Repentance must bring change in our lives. When we repent of our sin, we are making a choice to leave that sin behind us, to not repeat it. Yes, we may slip and commit that sin again. But then the guilt is a little deeper and the apology a little more sincere and the effort is renewed at a stronger commitment level as we again seek to live a faithful and devout life of faith. Martin Luther began what would become the Reformation by posting 95 theses on a church door. One theses related to this idea. Luther wrote: *"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”.* The Christian life is a life of repentance, a life ever turning back toward God, over and over and over.



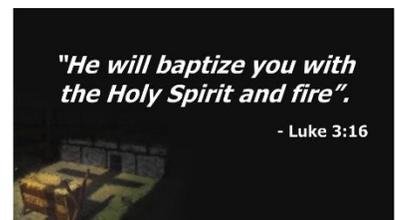
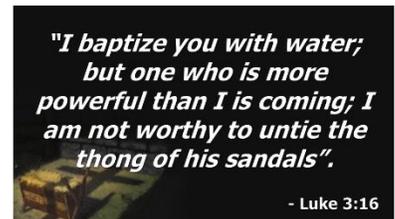
Our passage then turns to the “What Then Should We Do?” question. The answer to this question begins in the repentance. In the repentance we turn *from* our sin and we turn *to* our Savior. We choose to trust and follow Him in order to receive our salvation. The people who came out to see John would be drawn away from sin and would be instead drawn towards God. This is what we experience when we repent and strive to live a more faithful life. Even though it is hard to admit that we are wrong and to change, it is an important step in our faith. It brings us humility and a recognition of our dependence upon God. I found this great quote in the commentary on Luke that I was reading this week that speaks of the difficulty of repentance and also of the reward of turning back and once again walking with God:

"Do not get offended when God tells you He loves you and when He loves you enough to point out your sin then loves you enough to point you towards salvation. Do not be offended. Receive it – all of it". When we repent and choose to begin to walk with God again, we are reminded of our salvation that we claimed when we first confessed Jesus as Lord. Our response to God's love and His salvation is what John describes in verses ten through fourteen. When asked what we should do, John gets very practical in his response.

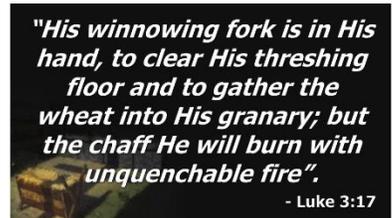
According to John the Baptist, we demonstrate our repentance by sharing what we have with others, by giving to the one in need. We demonstrate our repentance by treating others fairly and justly. We live out kindness and generosity once we understand how generous God was to us in Christ. In repentance we recognize that our abundance is to be shared in blessing our neighbors. In verse 11 we are told that if we have two coats, we should give one to someone who does not have a coat. In verse 12 again in 14, we are told that if we are in a position of power, we should not use that position to take advantage of others nor should we use the position to our own advantage. We should treat others as we wish to be treated. These messages should sound familiar. These are the messages that Jesus would soon begin to preach as well. Over and over, Jesus called the people to care for the poor, the orphan, the widow. Jesus teaches love and compassion and mercy as the guiding forces in our lives. By example, Jesus gave generously to others and calls us to do the same. Through leading people to repentance, John was preparing people to receive this Jesus as He came to minister to the world.

It is no wonder that the people started to ask John if he was the Messiah. They can see God at work in his life and they can see the fruit of John's ministry: people are repenting and turning towards God. In a religion and culture that has been searching for the Messiah for hundreds of years, in a time when the Roman occupation has ramped up the domination, the anticipation has built, and some begin to wonder in their hearts, is John the One?

John sets the record straight right away. In verse 16 he plainly says, *"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals"*. John is doing here what we should all do: point others to Jesus. In humble recognition of what was to come, John was saying that this is about the One to come: Jesus. To help this transition, John would become less so that Jesus would become more. John's baptism was symbolic. He was calling people to turn from sin and to realign themselves with God. The Messiah, the One who is come, is far above John. John is not worthy enough to even stoop down and untie the Messiah's sandals. John goes on, saying, *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"*. John's baptism was symbolic. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit – God's indwelling presence in the life of a believer. John also acknowledges that Jesus will also one day bring the fire of God's judgment when He returns in final glory. John turns to this reality in verse 17.



In verse 17, John reveals that one day Jesus will be the judge. Again, hear the words of John the Baptist: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"*. The winnowing fork would be used



to separate the wheat from the chaff, the usable from the unusable, the good from the bad. The wheat would be kept, and the chaff would be burned. This speaks of the end times, when Jesus returns. The wheat of faith will be collected in heaven while the chaff of unbelief is burned away in condemnation. This brings us back around to the question of the day: what then should we do?



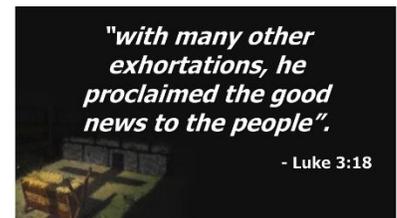
For John, and later for Jesus, repentance is the place to begin. It begins within as we begin to see the sin of selfishness or greed or pride or... As we repent of our selfish desires, we begin to give more generously, more freely. As we repent of the sin of pride and being judgmental, we begin to treat all people – young and old, rich and poor, men and women, straight and gay – fairly and with love. As we repent of the sin of greed, we begin to feel content with what we have instead of always straining for more or newer. As we repent of ego, we quit chasing after what the Jones have, and we quit trying to accumulate more "stuff". Repentance changes both our heart and our eyes. It produces fruit in our lives as we begin to live out our faith, blessing and loving and sharing life with others. In turn, this blesses us as we grow in our ability to turn to a loving and just God who is soon coming into the world as a baby. As we produce fruit, we grow in faith. There is an interconnected relationship that develops. As our faith grows, our fruit production benefits as well. The reverse is also true.

In our Advent study book, author Katie Dawson speaks of a similar connection that we find in our world and in our lives. She writes in terms of agriculture and of the balance that modern farming techniques and methods must strike with the natural world and its ecosystems. On the one hand, modern farming has greatly increased production, saving billions of lives from starvation. Technology has allowed humanity to produce enough food for the masses. Yet we must remain aware of the potential and possible impacts of new techniques and pesticides and fertilizers and other things that allow for such production. There is a balance we must maintain. To be aware of this balance, those in agriculture must remain intimately connected to the soil and air and water and plant and animal ecosystems. We have learned that the choices made in one area can have impacts upon another area. We too are a part of these interconnections. As the human race we also are interconnected with one another. This is part of what John was talking about when the people and the tax collectors and the Roman soldiers were asking how they needed to change to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah.

Their question, "What then should we do?" has implications for our lives as well. In our passage for today, speaking through John, God had answers for each person or group of people. What do you think God would say to us if we were to ask Him the same question? When the teacher or business owner or pastor or carpenter or daycare worker or banker or... among us asks, "What then should we do?", what would God say to each of us? What should we change, what should we wrestle with, to better prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord?

This season of Advent, this time of the year, is much about giving. When we consider our interconnections with each other, we must consider the ways that we affect or impact one another. This season is about giving in lots of different ways. A part of our reflection, a part of what we consider when we ponder John the Baptist's words for us today, is to consider what gifts of generosity are we offering others and to our church?

In the last verse of our passage today, we read that *"with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people"*. An exhortation is an emphatic



urging or a means of passionate encouragement. To proclaim means to declare publicly. John believed with all his heart that the good news had the power to change lives and to bring salvation to those who were lost and living without God. Do you believe the good news has the power to save? Do you believe?

Advent is a natural time to talk about faith and Jesus. It is easier now to ask someone if they are going to church for Christmas Eve, for example. It is easier at this time of year to talk about our faith and what it means to us at Christmas. As I close, I join John the Baptist, encouraging you to each share the good news of Jesus Christ this week. May we each be generous with our invitations this week, opening doors for others to come and meet Jesus this Advent season. May Jesus' light and love shine forth from each of us, beckoning others to come and kneel at the manger, to live for Jesus in our daily lives, and to one day come and experience the feast that Christ has prepared for those that love Him. May it be so for me and for you this week. Amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Serve:

- 1) In your faith life, how do you answer the question posed today: what then should you do?
- 2) Where in our community can we bring justice? Where can we seek to share our joy and our abundance?
- 3) How can we invite those who live outside our walls to come in and to be a part of the feast that we offer?