

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming...”

- Luke 3:16

There hadn't been a prophet in Israel for four hundred years. For four long centuries God's voice had been silent among His people. The Persians and the Greeks had come and gone, and after a brief hundred years of independence, now the Romans occupied the land.

For four hundred years the people had waited for God to deliver them, for God to restore the kingdom of David. Four hundred years... and all they heard was silence. But as life and history went on around them the quiet people of the land, waited, and watched; they read the Scriptures, celebrated the feasts, made their sacrifices, and prayed.

20 generations without a prophet. Then suddenly, *“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”* Suddenly, after all the years of waiting a prophet appeared among them. And the Lord's word to them? Prepare! *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”* because He is coming now!

John's message to the people then, and to you and me now, is an uncomfortable one. John does not lead with how the Messiah will make the world a better place. He leads with a question, “Are you ready to meet God face to face?” And he insinuates that, whatever our confidence to the contrary, we are not ready. To be ready we must repent. That is, part of our preparation for the coming of the Lord must be repentance – turning to the Lord- and with it to *“bear fruits worthy of repentance.”*

The sudden appearance of John at the Jordan was like a spark in dry grass. The people of Galilee and Judea flocked to hear John, to question John, and to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. Saint Matthew describes him for us, “*Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.*” John dresses like a prophet, he eats like a prophet. One prophet in particular: Elijah.

Elijah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, had not died, but had been taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Through the prophet Malachi (the last of the Old Testament prophets) the Lord had promised, “*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord.*”

And so the people wonder, is John just a prophet? Or is he Elijah? Or, could it be, that John is the Messiah?

John even talks like Elijah. He’s no respecter of persons. He doesn’t curry favor with the crowds. He speaks the hard, unvarnished truth. “*You brood of vipers!*” You children of the serpent in the Garden, he cries out to them, “*who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*”

It sounds harsh, because it is. John doesn’t have time to coddle the Sadducees, scribes, and Pharisees, or anyone else. They must hear the judgment of God and be made ready. John doesn’t have time for games. His message is simple. Repent. Turn to God and seek the forgiveness He desires to give you. Turn from your sin and back to God, “*bear fruit worthy of repentance.*”

He knows his audience, and he knows their prejudices and assumptions. He reminds them not to take false comfort in their genealogy. “*Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’*” Do not hear the call to repentance, the call to prepare your hearts, minds, and lives, and assume you can hedge your bets on not being a Gentile. “*God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*” That indeed is a harsh word for the Jews, especially the priests, scribes, and Pharisees. God doesn’t need you to keep His promise to Abraham.

God can keep His promise using these rocks if He chooses. So get on it! Repent! Turn to God. *“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.”* Judgment is here, turn to God or God will cut you down.

Yet while the leaders hear all this and harden their hearts, the people come to John in droves. Especially those who are seen by their betters as open and manifest sinners: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and even Roman soldiers. They hear John and believe. Why? Because they know that his description really is accurate. They know the reality of sin in their lives, yet now God is calling to them, and they hear and they come.

John baptizes them and they ask how then should we now live? John says, keep only what you need, *“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”* To the tax collectors he says, *“Collect no more money than the amount prescribed.”* To the soldiers, *“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

Yet even as he calls the people to repentance, baptizes them, and teaches them how to live and bear the fruits of repentance, John makes it clear he is not the One for whom they are waiting.

“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. 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.”

John is here to prepare them and us for Jesus. His message is meant for you and me now, not just for people back then. And just as it was then, it's an uncomfortable message now. But it remains true.

The word of God comes to us through John and the prophets and reminds us that we are not as ready to meet God as we want to think we are. All our technology, all our advancement, all our progress may help hide the truth from us, but it doesn't change the truth that we share the same fallen, sinful, sinfilled, humanity with the Saducees, scribes, Pharisees, prostitutes, tax collectors, soldiers, and all the rest who go to hear John.

As we just confessed, "*we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.*" And maybe we don't act like it right now, but that "*brood of vipers*" comment sticks all too often doesn't it? And so then does his exhortation to bear fruit worthy of repentance. We want our grace to be cheap. We want the forgiveness of sins without having to change, without the Word of God working on us and in us, without it uncovering more sin and reminding us that what we've done is not what God says, and what we've left undone is what God calls us to.

John's instructions to the crowds, the tax collectors, soldiers, and one can imagine the prostitutes is nothing radical in itself. It reveals the mundane, and unsuspectingly boring ways that sin happens. Share your coat with those who have no coat. Don't cheat your neighbors. Don't abuse your power and authority. This is in a way even more basic than the Ten Commandments, isn't it?

The Baptist shouldn't make us uncomfortable just because he seems rude and direct. He should make us uncomfortable because he points out how attached to sin we are, how normalized sin is for us. He reminds us that all too often we hedge our bets on grace – that's what it means "*to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father.'*" – rather than actually placing our faith in Jesus and hearing the hard truth His word speaks into our lives. We place our faith in grace, not in Christ who won the grace for us.

John reminds us we're not ready. He reminds us that there is judgment – the ax is lying at the root of the tree. Not the branches, the root! To take the unfruitful tree out and throw it into the fire.

What then are we to do? We are to listen to the Baptist because he points us beyond himself. He points us to the one who is coming after him. The one whose sandals he isn't worthy to untie. He points us to Jesus.

To Jesus who comes and dies for sinners, who dies for you. Jesus who is the shoot from the stump of Jesse, and can give life even to the tree that is taken out at the roots. Jesus who speaks the word that bears good fruit. Jesus whose word changes chaff into wheat for those who have faith in Him.

Jesus, John says, comes not just to baptize with water as a symbol of repentance. He comes to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And that is what happened to you in your baptism. It was not the water that washed you clean, but the Word of God, which brought the Holy Spirit upon you. The Spirit who washed you clean in Jesus blood. The Spirit who filled you with faith in Jesus. The Spirit who is now at work in you purging your sin with holy fire so that what is sinful in you is burned up.

John reminds us that we are not ready for the coming of the Lord. And in a strange way that is good news. It's good news because it awakens us to our need for the One who comes and bears our sins and dies our death. It awakens us to the truth that we need a Savior. We need Christ to come and grab hold of us, to make us holy, if we are stand before the Lord. John reminds us that we are not ready, that we need to get ready, and points us to Jesus who comes to make us ready. First through His life, death, and resurrection for our sake, and then by uniting Himself to us in Holy Baptism, and feeding us with His own flesh and blood.

John reminds us that the call of Advent to prepare the way of the Lord, to watch and to wait for Him, to live our lives as ones of daily repentance, means being pointed away from ourselves and to Jesus.

For it's through Jesus that we survive the ax of God's justice. It's through Jesus that we, whose hearts are made of stone, are given hearts of flesh and made

children of Abraham, and more than that, brothers and sisters of Jesus Himself and thus children of God. It's through Jesus that we are pruned and fed by the Word so that we may bear fruit worthy of repentance. It's Jesus – whose sandals John was unworthy to untie – who comes and unties our sandals and washes our feet and serves us even to the point of death on the cross. It is Jesus who takes what would be so much chaff to be burned and makes us into wheat to be gathered into His granary, His kingdom.

This is what Jesus has come to do. He has come to do it to you. So heed the Baptist's cry and look for the One to whom He points. The One who has given everything for you and prepares You to meet Him when He comes: Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. Amen.