

December 13, 2009
Advent 3

"Fruits of Repentance Bring Real Joy"

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? 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.

Did you notice how Stephen Trevarrow lit a pink candle on the Advent wreath at the beginning of our worship? This pink candle has been called the candle of joy or also the shepherd's candle. We think of the joy the shepherd's had when they returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard. We heard the Apostle Paul tell us to rejoice in the Lord, for the Lord is near. Think of how many Christmas carols encourage us to sing for joy because of Jesus' birth such as "Joy to the World!" We wish each other "Merry Christmas."

What about the words just read to you from the life of John the Baptist? At first they don't seem to fit the theme of joy that we find in our worship today. He calls people a brood of vipers. He speaks of the axe being laid to the root, and burning chaff with unquenchable fire. It seems more like a scary Christmas rather than a merry Christmas.

John the Baptist called for fruits of repentance. He challenged people to change their lives. He called on them to get rid of false beliefs and lives of sin so they could welcome Jesus when he came to them as the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. Imagine having a cup such as this filled with dirt. Someone offers to fill this cup for you with actual gold coins. Wouldn't it make sense to dump out the dirt and let that person fill the cup until it overflows with valuable coins? (Show gold coins) Real joy comes to us when we dump out the dirt of sin and false hope and look for our real lasting treasure in what Jesus has to offer us.

Joy when Jesus comes to us now

John the Baptist saw large crowds of people coming out to see him. Many of them were what we might call "looky-loos" or curiosity seekers who heard about John and wanted to see what it was that drew large crowds to remote wilderness area of the Jordan Valley. Imagine someone today preaching in a place like the Sisquoc River valley and drawing large crowds of people. Listen to how John greeted these people. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He called them vipers. The people who walked out into the Jordan Valley were well aware of the deadly vipers and other venomous snakes that could inject poison into their bodies and kill them.

These religious people who came to hear John were worse than deadly vipers. What is worse robbing banks and killing people or teaching God's Word incorrectly? These people taught that you could be religious on the outside and nasty on the inside. Jesus said of these people, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." They could be so religious in some areas and so mean and nasty in other areas of life. Do you see that person who pretends to be so religious and even gives large amounts of money to help the poor in our community but goes home and is mean and nasty to his wife and kids? He sincerely believes that on judgment day, when God unleashes his wrath again sin, his little bit of good here and there will cover his terrible life of sin.

Do you remember the words from the catchy song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town?" "Oh! You better watch out, You better not cry, You better not pout, I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town! He's making a list, He's checking it twice, He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice." Can you imagine teaching children they can get presents if they are nice? I actually heard a parent once telling a very bratty child in Costco that he would not get any presents from Santa if he did not behave and listen to his mother. The people who came to hear John were passing on the poisonous and venomous teaching that God rewards those who try to be nice or at least try to cover up their bad with a little bit of good here and there. Jesus talked about religious fanatics who give a tenth of the herbs in their garden and then turn around and steal a widow's house from her.

Then there were the people who thought they were God's children just because they were born into a Jewish family. John told them, "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." You can almost see John holding up a stone and saying these words. There are still people like this today who think they are connected to God just because their parents were religious or they were born into a home where they family went to church on Sunday, that somehow that will earn them points with the Lord. The gospel of John tells us that children of God are "children not born of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

John seems almost merciless as he preaches to these people to lead them to repentance and trust in Jesus for their salvation. "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." What do you do with dead branches and dead trees? You cut them down and throw them into the fire. If there is anything spiritual dead in your life and mine, we want to get rid of it and see it destroyed. See that part of your life over there that is constantly producing sin. You

need to get rid of it and destroy it. You see that lack of faith and trust in the Lord, laziness, unfaithfulness, complacency, not putting the Lord first. It's time to get out the axe. Chop. Chop. Chop. Get rid of it. Destroy it because it has the potential to keep us from kneeling at the manger in Bethlehem and receiving the blessings Jesus has to offer us.

Others in the crowd were stunned by what John the Baptist had to say. They said, "What should we do then?" John told the person who had two coats or tunics to share with someone who had none. He told the tax collectors to not collect more taxes than required and then keep some of it for themselves. He told the Roman soldiers they should not squeeze money out of people or falsely accuse them and that they should be content with their pay. Any time you start seriously examining any part of your life for improvement you become immediately aware of how large the problem of sin actually is in your life. It is similar to finding a little bit of mold in your bathroom, but then upon further examination the mold is inside the walls, and everything has to be torn out and replaced.

Why did John talk to people about repentance the way he did? John wanted them to find the real joy of forgiveness and peace in Jesus. He does not want these people to leave the Jordan Valley with the false hope of misplaced trust in themselves instead of in Jesus. People asked if he were the Christ or the Messiah. John immediately directed them to the real source of joy when he said, "I baptize you water but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Usually a servant would bend down and untie the sandals and wash the master's feet. John said that Jesus was so great, he was not even worthy of stooping down and performing that humble task. It was John who later pointed to Jesus and spoke these well known words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He wanted them to find the perfect cure for sin in God's Lamb and give up all this false hope of trusting in themselves. They had to see how bad their situation was before they could see the cure they had in Jesus.

How much are we in need of getting ride of false hope and false trust in ourselves? This past week the news reported on a study about children that appeared in the *The Journal Of Child Psychology And Psychiatry*: "Children will use any tool at their disposal to secure gratification. And as soon as the desire is fulfilled, be it some material want or simply an insatiable and narcissistic desire for validation, they quickly become bored and lose interest in their victims, all the while thinking only of satisfying whatever their next hedonistic craving might be." One mother took exception to these findings when she said of her five year old son Jimmy: "Not my Jimmy. Just this morning, he told me I was the best mommy in the whole world, in fact, he's been such a sweet little boy this month that Santa just may bring him everything he asks for." Before we get too hard on the children, let's examine our own lives more carefully. A close look at the human heart will reveal that the words of Jeremiah were not an exaggeration, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Oh, how we need John the Baptist to direct our eyes to see Jesus as the only hope for being loved by God. We never grow weary of Jesus' words, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Joy when Jesus comes in clouds of glory

Your Jesus who came to this earth and was born in Bethlehem and placed into a manger is the same Savior who wants you to meet him joyfully when he comes again in clouds of

glory. John said, "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 this barn, but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." See the farmer gather the wheat into bundles, then lay it on the ground, and run over it with a huge threshing sledge pulled up an ox or donkey to break the kernels from the stalks. See him take the fork and separate the straw from the wheat and the chaff. See him wait for the wind to come up in the evening and throw the wheat and chaff to separate the chaff from the wheat. He gathers the wheat and carefully puts it into his barn, and burns the chaff with fire.

For those who do not have Jesus this final judgment will be a scary time as they try to stand before him hoping their puny efforts at improvement will make up for sins of the past. There will be unquenchable fire, a weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place where the worm does not die. That's scary. Oh, the joy that will be yours when Jesus gathers you into his hands like precious grains of wheat and takes you to the place he has prepared for you. That's what John the Baptist wanted for all people. That's what Jesus wants for all people living in our world today. He longs for them to repent and return to him before it is too late. That makes for a Merry Christmas not a scary Christmas. We light the pink candle of joy and pray, "Even so Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen."