

Advent 3
December 13, 2015

“The Joy that Comes When God Works Repentance”

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.

This morning we lit the pink candle on our Advent wreath which is called the candle of joy. What joy is ours as we celebrate the birth of our Savior. What joy is ours as we think about Jesus coming back to us on clouds of glory. We just heard the words from our second lesson: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" We wish each other, "Merry Christmas." We sing hymns of joy such as "Joy to the World."

So if this is to be a Sunday with emphasis on joy, why do we have this reading from the life of John the Baptist that seems the very opposite of joy? He calls the people who come out to hear him preach "a brood of vipers." He warns about the axe at the root of the tree and chaff being burned in the fire. Wouldn't such a message of repentance turn people off and make them want to go home?

No, the very opposite was true. The people who came out to hear John did not pack up and go home. They stayed to hear about their solution to the problem of sin that totally destroyed their lives. They wanted to hear about the Savior who was to come and they wanted to change their lives. Real joy came to them in the repentance that God worked in their hearts. Real joy comes to us when God works repentance in our hearts. Today we want to speak to you on this subject: **"The Joy that Comes When God Works Repentance."**

Getting rid of the bad

Repentance means getting rid of what is bad in our lives and turning to what is good.

Listen again to the words of John the Baptist that changed these people and helped them get rid of what was bad in their lives. "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.'" John did not call them garden snakes, or gopher snakes or king snakes. He called them venomous vipers. What makes a viper so dangerous? It latches on to you with its fangs and then it begins injecting poisonous venom into your body. Human beings are like venomous snakes. They inject into themselves and into each other poisonous ideas on what is right and what is wrong. They also inject into each other poisonous ideas on how a person can overcome their problem of sin and make themselves right with God.

So let's look more closely at the people whom John calls vipers. See the super religious people called Pharisees and Sadducees. They were obsessed with keeping laws they added to God's laws. See the tax collectors who were bothered by the way they cheated people in their taxes. See the Roman soldiers who were bothered by the way they mistreated others and extorted money from them. All of these people came to John to find a way to improve their lives on the outside to cover up the corruption that is on the inside. That kind of thinking is deceptively poisonous.

Let's think of this example to illustrate how foolish it is to think you can cover the bad you have done with a little good here and there. If you break a bone in your leg it will not work to just put a band aid over the break. I know a person who broke the bones in her leg in multiple places because of a skiing accident. She is still trying to recover. When sin corrupts you on the inside, it messes up your life. It shatters and destroys your relationship with God. You cannot cover up this problem of sin with a little improvement here and there. This will not help you escape the judgment to come. That is the greatest lie Satan tells people. That is more poisonous than the most venomous viper. We desperately need our God to change our hearts by leading us to recognize our problem of sin and lead us back to him for a cure.

This poison of vipers is everywhere. Think of the catchy Santa Claus song.

"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." And what are the consequences of not being good before Christmas? Instead of a nice gift you will receive a lump of coal. I actually heard a parent in Costco once telling a disrespectful child 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.

Look again at the strong words John uses to lead these people to see their need of a Savior. He told them how wrong they were to think that they were God's children because they were Jewish people who descended from Abraham. "For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." He told them the axe was already being laid to the root and the tree was about to be thrown into the fire. These strong calls to repentance or change are not intended to take joy away from people. They are intended

to lead them to a whole new life that turns away from sin and turns to God for mercy. This what we might call tough love.

What do I want in my life in these days before Christmas? What do I want every day of my life here on this earth? I God to use his Word and the work of the Holy Spirit to lead me to repentance. As Martin Luther said at the beginning of his famous 95 Theses, "The entire life of the Christian is one of repentance." So we cry out to the Lord in the words of Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness..."

Remember the illustration we used for repentance in our sermon last Sunday. Here I am a poor beggar starving to death. I hold in my hand this bag which is filled with garbage that is rotting and decaying. I eat the garbage and it makes me sick. A king comes to me and he says, "Let me take that garbage from you. Let me give you these gold coins." (Show "gold coins") Jesus leads us to give up the garbage of sin. He convinces us that he will take this garbage on himself and destroy. He gives us the greatest treasure we could ever possess, his precious blood that pays for our sin.

The people who came to John heard him preach about the garbage of sin that was in their lives. John told them the truth about the judgment to come. Then he joyfully pointed them to Jesus the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Taking hold of the good

What joy these people had as they listen to John speak about the Messiah who would come and deliver them. Did you catch how this joy was described? It is in verse 15. "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ." They were waiting expectantly. They were hoping to see the Messiah who would give them forgiveness. They even wondered if John might be that Messiah. Why was the Christmas song "I Dreaming of a White Christmas" so popular during the WW2? Because it captured the emotions of soldiers on the battlefield who were hoping to be home for Christmas. These people were hoping for the Messiah to come.

John wanted these people to find their joy in Jesus not in him. "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.

John pleaded with these people to believe in the Messiah who was to come. It says in verse 18 that he "exhorted" the people. He preached the good news to them again and again. He told them that Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. He pictured Jesus as a person with his winnowing fork in his hand separating the grain from the chaff and burning the chaff in unquenchable fire. The time to believe in Christ and his

forgiveness is now, not tomorrow. Who knows if judgment day will come before this day comes to an end?

Why do we find so much joy when we look into the manger and see a tiny baby whom we believe is Lord and God from all eternity? We see the tiny baby as our solution to the problem of sin that has bitten us like a poisonous snake and sent its venom throughout our bodies. So we sing, "What Child is this who, laid to rest On Mary's lap is sleeping?" Then we go on to sing, "Good Christians fear; For sinners here The silent Word is pleading. Nails, spear shall pierce him through, The Cross he'll bear for me for you."

Dear Christian, think of the big change that has come into your life. Your Heavenly Father has opened your eyes to see your problem of sin and he has opened your eyes to see your solution in Jesus. That is our greatest joy. And there are even more changes that keep coming to us. The people wanted to know what they could do to change their lives even more. John told them to share instead of being selfish. He told the tax collectors to stop cheating. He told Roman soldier to stop falsely accusing people and to be content with their wages.

Look again at the pink candle that we have on our Advent. Think again of the words, "Rejoice in the Lord. Again I say rejoice." The Lord keeps leading you to repentance. May the candle of joy always burn brightly in your life and mine especially as we rejoice in how our God has lead us to repentance. Amen.