

**Luke 3:7-18** So John kept saying to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance! Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.” <sup>10</sup>The crowds began to ask him, “What should we do then?” <sup>11</sup>He answered them, “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same.” <sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>To them he said, “Collect no more than what you were authorized to.” <sup>14</sup>Soldiers were also asking him, “And what should we do?” He told them, “Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages.” <sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John could be the Christ. <sup>16</sup>John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” <sup>18</sup>Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.

This is going to be my last opportunity to preach the message of Advent. An already short season became even shorter because I was gone for the first Sunday in Advent. Next Sunday which would normally be the fourth Sunday in Advent will instead be our children’s Christmas service. So it’s been another one of those “blink and it’s over” kind of things.

The word Advent literally means arrival. The season really serves two purposes. It prepares our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Savior on Christmas once again. It’s so easy to get caught up in buying presents and planning for parties that we forget the main focus of the season—that we can see God’s great love for the world lying in a manger. The solution to all life’s problems is in the baby boy.

Advent also prepares us for Jesus’ return on the Last Day. It’s so easy to get caught up in day to day living that we don’t give his return a second thought. So in this way, the Advent season isn’t just this brief, four-week span. It is every day of our lives. Live an Advent Life. It’s not optional, so love your neighbor, and love your Savior.

In the beginning of this text it seems like John the Baptist is just yelling at random to people who were coming out to him in the wilderness. That would be like me saying to someone who wants to have their baby baptized, “What do you mean you want baptism, you jerk!” Now certainly John had a rough appearance and an equally rough message. Matthew fills us in on one detail. He was addressing the Pharisees and Sadducees.

They were the ones who got the country in the spiritual mess it was. The Sadducees only believed the first five books of the Bible were God’s Word. They didn’t believe in angels or in the resurrection. The Pharisees accepted all of God’s Word, which is great, but they also added over 600 laws to God’s Law, which is terrible. They taught people to look to themselves instead of trusting in God.

John gave one example of that kind of attitude, “**Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones.**” They felt they were always good because they had Abraham’s blood flowing through their veins. That didn’t matter at all. What God wanted for them is to share Abraham’s faith.

We do the same thing today, sadly. The elders have been talking with a lot of people who don’t really want to come to church but they want to stay members here, as if having your name on our membership list is a one-way ticket into heaven. Or people say, “My grandfather helped build this church!” Great! He exercised his faith. Do you think you can get into heaven just because he is there?

John warns, “**Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.**” If you have a tree in your yard that isn’t producing leaves anymore or half the branches are dead or if it’s rotting, you will cut it down. You don’t want a storm to come along and drop the tree into your living room.

John’s point is that it is not optional to live like a believer. We can’t live like believers when we are in this building and act like everybody else when we’re not. Just like an apple tree that never produces apples is dead so also a person who isn’t producing fruits of faith is spiritually dead. We can call ourselves believers until we are blue in the face, but our lives will tell a completely different story.

John says, “**Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance!**” Remember what repentance means. It is a complete change of heart. It pictures us walking in one direction and then making a complete 180

and coming back in the exact opposite direction. It means that we are genuinely sorry for our sins and we trust in Jesus alone for our forgiveness. We can't do that on our own. God enables us to live a life of repentance through the Word and Sacraments.

So the way we live will show our repentance. In the next part of the sermon John will give some specific examples of what that might look like. Basically whatever sin we repented of, we are going to work hard so we don't repeat it. Then our Christianity won't be like a well-pressed suit or a fancy dress that we put on when we're here but we immediately change into something else when we're home. It's who we are.

Live an Advent Life. It's not optional, so love your neighbor.

Luke shows us just how bad things had gotten spiritually for the people. **"<sup>10</sup>The crowds began to ask him, 'What should we do then?'"** They had no clue what fruits of repentance would even look like. It's not that God had kept it a secret from them. The issue was with the things the Pharisees had taught them. Repentance for them wasn't even a thing. It wasn't living in love for God. It was living in fear of God.

God had inspired the Prophet Micah to write, **"With what am I to appear before the LORD? How should I bow down to God on high? Should I appear before him with burnt offerings, with one-year-old calves? <sup>7</sup>Will the LORD be delighted with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of streams of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my rebellion, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? <sup>8</sup>He has told you, mankind, what is good. What does the LORD require from you, except to carry out justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?"**

The examples that John gives are just specific ways to do what God had already told them 700 years earlier but they never took to heart. John said, **"Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same."** The Apostle John wrote something similar, **"Whoever has worldly wealth and sees his brother in need but closes his heart against him—how can God's love remain in him?"**

It always brings a smile to my face when someone sidles up to me privately and says, "Pastor, I heard that so-and-so is having some problems now. Is there any way that I can help?" I didn't lay a guilt trip on them. Their love for their Savior and love for that person moved them to look for an opportunity to help them. We did this sort of thing recently with our donations to the food pantry. Just because that drive is done doesn't mean that the opportunities are gone. Look for more ways to help others.

Next came the tax collectors. John said, **"Collect no more than what you were authorized to."** People hated tax collectors because they worked for the Romans. The way they made money was by collecting a little more tax than what their superiors asked from them. That's fine, but they often collected so much extra that they became fantastically wealthy. They were thieves. John basically told them to do their work, but they shouldn't abuse their fellow Israelites in the process.

After that were Roman soldiers, **"Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages."** If a Roman soldier drew his sword and demanded money, you'd better hand it over. You couldn't go to the police. They were the police. So it was similar to the tax collectors. Don't use your position of power or authority to enrich yourself at the expense of others.

People sometimes ask why God allows certain things to happen. Why did that person get cancer? Why did he allow that hurricane to be so destructive? Or even why is my boss such a jerk? I can't answer why God chooses to do things that he decided by his own authority. That's above my pay grade. But all of these bad things that happen are opportunities for us to exercise our faith.

When we help someone in the congregation who is struggling it proves that we aren't just a loose association of people. We are family. We are brothers and sisters just like we always say. When we send assistance to people affected by a hurricane we show that we really are concerned and then we are earning an opportunity to take care of their greatest problem—we can point them to their Savior. That is our privilege as children of God.

Live an Advent Life. Love your neighbor and finally love your Savior.

It shouldn't surprise us with everything going on that Luke writes, **"<sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John could be the Christ."** He's preaching like no one ever preached before! Could God finally be keeping his promise and sending the Savior? For some people it might be tempted to claim that they are the Savior. Many people have. John showed that they were partially right. The Savior is indeed coming soon, but he's not the guy.

John told them, **"someone mightier than I is coming."** Basically he is saying, "If you think my life and ministry are impressive, you ain't seen nothing yet." In last week's first lesson we heard how God foretold

John's ministry through the Prophet Malachi. In last week's Gospel lesson we heard how John began his ministry, fulfilling the words of the Prophet Isaiah. His job is to prepare the way for the Lord.

So John does just that. He gives some descriptions of the coming Savior. He said that Jesus is mightier than he. He wasn't even worthy to wash Jesus' feet. That's true because Jesus isn't just a human being. He is also true God. He would prove that throughout his ministry by the many miracles that he performed, whether that would be feeding thousands of people, healing the sick, calming storms, and even raising the dead.

John also says some words that unfortunately people have twisted and distorted, "**I baptize you with water...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**" People have taken this to mean that baptizing with water doesn't mean anything. You have to have this special spirit baptism where you feel the Holy Spirit's presence in your heart and life. That's not what John is saying and it completely contradicts the rest of what the rest of the Bible says about baptism.

Jesus explains what John meant. Right before he ascended into heaven he told his disciples, "**John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.**" That was foretelling the powerful outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. Later when Peter met a man named Cornelius, he remembered Jesus' words. Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on them too to show Peter and the other Jewish believers that the message about him was for the whole world.

John's point here is that he is baptizing because God commanded him to. God gives baptism its power, not him. Jesus could send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and to Cornelius' family because he is true God and has that power and authority. John also shows how Jesus will have the power to judge the whole world. He will win forgiveness and eternal life and make them available everyone.

Luke sums up the rest of John's ministry this way, "**18Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.**" In other words, he was a faithful pastor. He showed the people how Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies. He is the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Even though John is long since dead, he still speaks to us and points us to Jesus through passages like these.

That good news is why we do what we do. We don't live for God to make him happy. We live for God because he is already happy with us through Jesus. When we think about how Jesus lived for us, died for us, rose again for us, and rules everything for us, that completely changes our lives and our mindsets. This is news that is too good to keep to ourselves. Everything we do ultimately is to lead more souls to him.

Live an Advent Life. It's not optional, so love your neighbor, and love your Savior. You are invited to join us for our children's Christmas service next Sunday as well as our special Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. As we look once again into the manger, let's also keep an eye peeled on the sky—looking forward to the day our Savior returns for us.