

Good News (with Exhortations)

December 12, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ 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, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors 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 Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. 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 barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

That last verse seems like a bit of a paradox: **And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.** How do you exhort someone and convey good news all at the same time? If someone referred to me as a "brood of vipers," I have to admit I would not take that as "good news." According to the online version of Merriam-Webster, the definition of an exhortation is "language

intended to incite and encourage." We live in an age where people do not like to be told what to do. Actually, the more you try to tell people what to do, the more likely it is that they will ignore you or intentionally do the opposite of what you tell them or, worse case scenario, get loud and/or violent with you.

Once you think about, there is really no age where people liked to be told what to do. Adam and Eve could do almost anything in the garden of Eden. There was only one thing they were told NOT to do, and that was the very thing they chose to do. And by doing so, they brought sin into the world. From that day onward, we humans have a tendency to do the very things we are told not to do, and we have the tendency to not do the things we are told to do. That is what we call the human condition. That is what the Bible calls sin.

Yet there are many people today who don't believe in sin. Maybe they won't tell you in so many words, but the *act* like they don't believe in sin. Or, if they do believe in sin, they always point the finger at someone else. Do you remember – Adam and Eve did the same thing. When God asked them why they ate from the forbidden tree, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on (I know, bad joke – but know you will remember).

When John the Baptist began preaching, he focused on "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). He even preached that to his fellow Jews who did not believe they needed to repent. Why should they repent when they are the children of Abraham? They believed that since they were descended from Father Abraham, they had an automatic "in" with the kingdom of God. Sorry, that didn't cut it as far as John the Baptist, and by extension God, was concerned. John preached to them: "***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. 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.***"

A person cannot rely on someone else to get them into God's kingdom, not even Father Abraham. A person cannot blame somebody else for the mess the world is in. You have to look at the world and acknowledge that you too play a part in why the world is such a mess. We are also responsible for the world's brokenness, because we are sinners, just like every other human who has and who will ever live on this planet. Only one person is without sin, and that is Jesus Christ.

And it's not enough to say we are sinners, and then keep on sinning as though we are not intending to change. To sin and keep on going in the same direction is not true

repentance. Repentance means “to turn around.” When we turn away from our sin and turn toward God, that is true repentance. When we repent of our sin, our lives should change. John the Baptist reminded his hearers that when they repented, they had to show evidence of it: **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**

This was such startling news to those hearing John’s preaching, that they didn’t know what to do next. We have three instances where after people hear John preaching “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” that they responded, in essence, with a question of “What’s next?”

To the crowd in general, John told them to share with those who have need. If they had two tunics, give one away to a person who had none. If they had sufficient food, give to the one who has none.

Even in the best of times, people do not think fondly of tax collectors. Some of them had been listening to John. He did not advise them to quit their jobs. Instead, he told them to only collect what is necessary. Tax collectors had a tendency to over-charge and pad their pockets. John advised them to repent of their past and stop behaving unjustly.

Even soldiers came to Jesus asking what they should do. These were likely soldiers who were Jewish who, unlike Roman soldiers, only acted like local police officers. Many of them lived crooked lives as well. John exhorts them to not extort others and to not accuse people falsely. In other words, they also were not to quit their jobs, yet at the same time not to do anything that would not be in alignment with their baptism of repentance.

John’s baptism was not one of salvation, but one of direction. John’s baptism was intended to point to the one who was coming. John was nothing compared to the One who was to come. He stated, **one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.** Only the lowliest of servants would be expected to untie someone’s sandal straps. The mud and animal excrement that would cake on a traveler’s feet would be horrendous, and untying the sandal straps would be a most disgusting job. Yet Jesus took it one step farther. He would not only untie the sandals from someone’s feet, he would wash them. John’s baptism could not compare to the baptism of the one who was to come: **I baptize you with water. ...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** John’s purpose was only to point to the One who was coming after him.

John’s image of Jesus is one that doesn’t fit comfortably with those who think of Jesus as only a friend. John uses a familiar agricultural metaphor of his day: **“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.” When a farmer wanted to separate his good wheat from the rest of the junk (chaff), he would take a forkful of the wheat with his winnowing fork, toss it in the air, and the lighter, frivolous stuff would just blow away. This frivolous stuff, or chaff as the Scriptures say, was then thrown into the fire to be burned. This image of Jesus separating the good from the bad does not set well with those who think that God’s grace will permit us to do whatever it is we want. There will come a time when the good are separated from the bad. The good will spend all eternity with Christ. The bad will be burned in the unquenchable fire. Some angrily preach that that is a bigoted, exclusivist point of view. Is it then not surprising that it is usually those very same people who reject John’s worldview of separating the good from the bad, who are also those do not believe in sin or that they need to produce fruit of their repentance?

In the season of Advent it is good for us to heed the words of John the Baptist in all generations. First, we need to acknowledge our need of repentance. If we do not think we are sinners, then we won’t believe we are in need of repentance, and ultimately in need of someone to save us from our sins. Second, we need to produce fruit of our repentance. People should not have to guess if we are followers of Christ. It should be obvious by how we behave. Like those who first heard John the Baptist, we can prepare the way of the Lord by producing fruit of our repentance. And we should be grateful that we have a gracious God who has forgiven our sins through the mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.