

The Third Sunday In Advent (December 16, 2018)	1767
O. T. Lesson: Zephaniah 3:14-17	The common Service: p. 15
Epistle: Philippians 4:4-7	14
Gospel: Luke 3:15-18	Psalm 130
Text: Luke 3:7-14	32
Theme: " <u>Repent!</u> "	11 vs. 1, 2
I. Do not say, "We have Abraham as our father."	Communion: 36
II. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."	11 vs. 3, 4

Peace to all of you who are in Christ Jesus!  
 Luke 3:7-14

Lord God, strengthen our hearts, and prepare us for Christmas through the message of your chosen forerunner of our Savior. Amen.

Dear friends, who are preparing for Christmas,

On Jordan's bank the Baptist cried. The Jordan is the major river in Palestine. It is the lowest river on this planet, dropping far below sea level, and emptying into the Dead Sea. With the high mountain ranges on both sides of the Jordan valley, it is obvious that this is rugged country. Add to that the fact that the Jordan valley rarely receives rainfall, and during the summer, the temperatures usually remain over 100 degrees, even at night.

It was in this Jordan wilderness that the voice of John the Baptist was heard, a man as rugged as his surroundings; his clothes made of camel's hair; a simple leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts, which are like grasshoppers, and wild honey that he found in the stony clefts. Not a spectacular man, but a man with a spectacular message, a message that drew crowds out into that wilderness, thousands upon thousands of people. John was the forerunner, the one to prepare the way for the coming Savior, the one to prepare the people to receive their Savior and his forgiveness. In that sense, John prepared the people for Christmas, the coming Christ. So as we prepare for Christmas, prepare to welcome the Christ-child into our hearts, we do well to listen to and take to heart the message of John the Baptist. His message in one word: "Repent!" Do not say, "We have Abraham as our father." But "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

That word "repent" means to change one's way of thinking, to change from unbelief to faith, to see our errors in our own ways in regard to God, and accept his forgiveness for our sins.

Many of the people who came out to John to listen to him preach and to be baptized by him were not repentant, and so they were not ready for the Savior. Oh, they thought they were ready. They were good upstanding citizens. They never broke the laws of the land. They attended worship services regularly at the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day. They said their prayers to God each day, and they did their good works. Many of these people were Pharisees, who prided themselves with leading better than average lives.

But John addresses these people, "You brood of vipers!" "You bunch of snakes, poisonous snakes, ready to strike at any time, wicked, dangerous, destructive terrorists, like that old serpent himself, the devil." "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" "Certainly no one could have told you that you could escape the wrath of the Lord when he comes with hearts the way yours are." "Repent!" That is what was lacking. That is why those people were not ready for the Savior. They were impenitent.

They boldly stood there, blind to the fact that they were sinners. They felt and showed no sorrow for their sins, so also they had no trust in the coming Savior to deliver them from sin. What good would a Savior from sin be for these people who didn't think they had any need for forgiveness? What good is Christmas for people who have no use for a Savior? To such people John says, "Repent!"

Some did not like what they heard from the mouth of John. In fact, some even claimed he was demon-possessed because they objected to what he said. These people were Israelites, Abraham's descendants, to whom God's promises had been given. They were the chosen people of God. Surely they had nothing to worry about, nothing to repent about. How dare this John tell them they were not prepared for the Lord! How dare he call them a brood of vipers! John anticipated their objection as he continued, "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." So what if these people were natural descendants of Abraham? That makes no difference. What really matters is if they have faith, a repentant and trusting faith in the Savior from sin, like Abraham did. Those are the true children of Abraham, those who have faith, and faith begins with that word: "Repent!"

Later on the Jews pulled this same stunt on Jesus when he preached repentance to them. They told him, "Abraham is our father." "If you were Abraham's children," answered Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me! He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." Then the people accused Jesus of being demon-possessed too.

We might have the impression that Jesus was a mild-mannered type of person who came and told people, "All is well." But not when people refused to repent. Then there was a problem, a severe problem, and then Jesus preached the law in all of its harshness, and told people where they stood, that they were children of the devil, on their way to eternal destruction. And we must proclaim that same message of the law in all of its severity to those who do not repent, as did John the Baptist: "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." To those who do not repent, the message of Christmas is destruction and judgment, for they are rejecting their Savior.

May God continually work repentance in our hearts, and bring about that change in us. We may appear to be good Christian people, doing all that we should be doing, and think, "All is well between me and God." But if we do not repent, we remain a brood of vipers. Just as those impenitent Jews could not rightly claim to be children of Abraham, so if we do not repent, we cannot rightly claim to be God's people either. Then we cannot rightly claim to be Christians.

Jesus came to forgive sins, and when we repent of our sins, then we are ready to receive our Savior who suffered and died to take our sins away. Then we find our mild-mannered Savior who says, "Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened, burdened with sin, and I will give you rest." To the penitent, Jesus proclaims, "Your sins are forgiven; go in peace; all is well between you and God."

Repentance is the message of Advent. Repentance is so all-important in our lives. That is why, as a part of our Sunday morning worship service, we confess our sins, that we are by nature sinful, and that we have disobeyed God in our thoughts, words and actions; that we have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. Then we hear the absolution, the proclamation of the gospel that God, our heavenly Father, has been

merciful to us and has given his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Therefore, all of our sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We receive the forgiveness of sins as we receive in the Lord's Supper the very body and blood of our Savior, given and shed for us on the cross. We see repentance and forgiveness at work in baptism. Through water and the word the Holy Spirit brings about that change, repentance worked in the heart, forgiveness of sins.

There on the banks of the Jordan, by the grace of God, there were those who heeded the message of John the Baptist. To them he offered forgiveness of sins through the Savior to come. As his name proclaims, John the Baptist baptized the penitent, washing away their sins. Those who received that forgiveness then asked John a question, that question that is so very natural for forgiven sinners to ask, that question that everyone into whose heart the Savior has come asks: "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. "How can we serve the Lord, and be a people prepared for him?" John tells them, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Repentance is not only a change in one's thinking, but also a change in one's will and actions. When we receive that greatest of all gifts of forgiveness through our Savior, that changes us through and through, and it simply becomes a natural thing for us to strive to serve the Lord, to ask, "What should I do? What can I do?" That's what fruit in keeping with repentance is; a life of thanksgiving and service to the Lord who has saved us from sin.

John gave the people specific examples of fruit in keeping with repentance. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." The repentant person changes from a selfish individual to one who is filled with love toward others, a spirit of generosity and giving, mindful of the love of God, and what he has given.

To the tax collectors, John said, "Don't collect any more than you are required to." That was the common sin of the tax collectors. They would collect extra money, with which to line their own pockets. For them, repentance meant that they would stop cheating the people.

To the soldiers, John said, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." Soldiers commonly used their position to take advantage of people, and they also had the reputation of living a wild life. For the penitent soldier, this would change.

From these examples we can carry into our own lives the concept of producing fruit in keeping with repentance. Wherever we see sinfulness in our lives, let us beg God for mercy, trust in his full and free forgiveness, and with his help, strive to serve him, instead of serving sin.

This is the time of year to put up the Christmas tree, string up the lights, bring out the ornaments and decorations. It's time to bake the cookies and do the Christmas shopping. It's a joyful time of year. But it is not a time for a frivolous and carefree attitude, an attitude that simply says, "All is well in my life." Because by ourselves, all is not well. If it were, Jesus would not have had to be born on earth to die for you and for me. May the message from the banks of Jordan find its way into our hearts this Christmas season. "Repent!" Then we are ready to hear that more glorious message of angels: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior."

Amen.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.