

I feel so grateful to get to be with you all today...not primarily because of my preaching but more because of my participation with you all in the worship of our King Jesus. I will be preaching from our Gospel reading in Luke 3 and boy is it an intense passage to preach from for a first time. I will say, it's much easier to preach than the introductory sermon I preached at a previous church: the story of Zedekiah. Zedekiah was Judah's last king, whose sons were killed before his eyes, then his eyes were gouged out, and then he was taken in chains to Babylon. I was preaching that like, "ok, let's maybe consider not being like Zedekiah? Let's pray!"

But this text from Luke is similarly jarring to our ears. Whatever expectations we may have had for John the Baptist, his intro and demeanor jolt us. The crowds are coming to him in droves and, not only that, but they are wanting to be baptized by John! He's gotta be absolutely thrilled to include this in his donor letter for the year. "Crowds, choosing to come all the way out to the wilderness, came to be baptized by me." It took effort, sacrifice, intentionality for the crowds to come. It was not unlike attending a church in the middle of December in a mostly outdoor location, parking in a field that will very likely leave your car spinning its tires in vain trying to get out. John must be so happy with the turn out! But that's not what we see in the text. Instead, his opening line is, "*YOU BROOD OF VIPERS. Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?*" And we see the real nature of John's ministry of preparation. We see that the prophecy from Isaiah regarding "every mountain and hill being made low" feels different than we may have thought. We may have expected it to be like a rock star descending gracefully via pulley from an arena's rafters, but this passage feels more like what happened to the Kingdome.

And we're going to see from John the Baptist's message that **the prepared way of the Lord is paved with repentance**. That's the main point that I want us to focus on: the prepared way of the Lord is paved with repentance. And it's my prayer that God would lead us as a community into continual, active, and sacrificial repentance because of the all-surpassing value of knowing Christ.

The first section of the passage is found in verses 7-9, in which John the Baptist communicates the **need for repentance**. I want to start by considering why John had such harsh

words for the crowds. Why would he speak this way to people who are presumably coming to participate in a baptism of repentance? “Why are you getting so mad at us? I thought this is what you wanted!” We learn from the parallel passage in Matthew 3 that John’s response was precipitated by witnessing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism. These are religious leaders who will continuously throughout the gospels not only reject Jesus for themselves but also seek to keep others from following Jesus as well. Matthew’s clarification helps us understand what’s happening in Luke’s account. What’s NOT happening is that the tired, the poor, the huddled masses are seeking to repent of their sins and follow Jesus and end up getting chewed out by John the Baptist. John’s words are brought about by the wolfish interests of the Pharisee and Sadducee leaders. They will repeatedly seek to destroy Jesus and discredit his message, leading hordes of people under their influence in harm’s way.

His intro words (“you brood of vipers”) sound instantly harsh to us, but probably not as harsh as they should. John’s not just calling these religious leaders “snakes” or “vipers” but a “brood of vipers” – children of vipers. Read this way, we draw our memory back to Genesis 3 when God said to the deceiving serpent that there would be “enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring” (Gen. 3:15). John’s not just calling them slippery or dangerous. He is calling them descendants of the evil one. They’re following the footsteps of Satan himself. John’s words are resonant with Jesus’ words to those who were opposing him in John 8:44: “*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.*” However harsh we thought John was being, it’s likely his language is even more severe than what hits us immediately. “Your life is testifying to the reality that you are not serving God, but the devil.” Why the strong language?

There are several things we pick up on. We get the sense in verse 7 that these leaders are flocking to John as a cheap way of avoiding approaching wrath. It seems that they’re coming not with a spirit of humility, but a spirit of entitlement. “Abraham’s our father, so we should be good to go. We’ll cross our religious T’s and dot our spiritual I’s and carry on with life as we’ve known it. We have the pedigree, we have the connections, we have the proximity to the right institutions. God is certainly pleased with us.” But John instantly rejects their assumption. “*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with*

*repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."* John points out a couple things:

He points out that there is impending judgment. The Pharisees and Sadducees weren't wrong that there was wrath that they needed to escape from. But they seem to have underestimated two huge things. First, they underestimated the urgency of their situation. The axe was at that time being laid to the root of the trees. That was no time to hem and haw or put it off for another day. They need to make haste in rectifying their situation. And they also underestimated what this message demanded. These leaders assumed that their pedigree as descendants of Abraham gave them good standing in the Day of Judgment, and they assumed external rites like baptism further guaranteed their firm footing, especially in terms of their public image. These things are easily compartmentalized and performed (so long as you're born in the right family). But for those who aren't born in the right family? "Well, you should have thought about that before you were born." The message of the religious leaders can be condensed into: "good news for the elite, bad news for the rest." An outsider could perform certain rites to get a foot in to the community, but even when you were "in," it was a hierarchical community. And at the top of this hierarchy were those born into the right families. And, dangerously, increased piety led to increased power and position within this hierarchy. "Doing the right thing" became tied to "being an impressive, important person."

But what John the Baptist is after in preparing the people is true repentance, not moral impressiveness or a shiny religious resume. And John the Baptist doesn't just communicate the need of repentance, but **the fruits of repentance**, which we see in verses 10-14. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance," he says. And this repentance isn't mostly revealed in the words we say or the feelings we feel. Repentance is revealed in the fruits in our lives. Imagine you invite me over to your house and prepare a meal for me. While I eat, I'm constantly saying, "this tastes delicious!" But with each bite you see me grimacing and gagging. I say something like, "wow, this is so good, I might save the rest of it to finish when I get home! That bite was just so extraordinary that I don't want to eat it all right here...I want to savor it!" Which of those will

speak more clearly to you? Which one will you believe? My words or my dry heaving? We see from John the Baptist that repentance is a whole-person reorientation of our values expressed in actual, real world actions. Repentance isn't revealed when you simply *say* you're repentant, nor is it revealed when you *feel* like you're repentant. It's revealed when you *"bear fruits in keeping with repentance."* And people come up to John the Baptist wondering how they're to respond to such an urgent message. *"What then shall we do?"* they ask.

And oh man does John the Baptist get to the point. He's rubbing his hands together going, "I was hoping you'd ask." Have you ever had a friend without pretense who says exactly what she thinks without worrying about social taboos or typical societal norms? I love these people because they keep me on my toes...I can feel my gut getting tense when they say something like, "well, THIS room could use a vacuuming!" or "so are you pretty lonely after your boyfriend broke up with you?" You don't need to guess what they're feeling or thinking, they just say it. John the Baptist isn't scared of stepping on some toes. Instead, he goes where few of us dare to tread: straight into finances. *"When then shall we do?"* the crowds ask. He says, *"Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."* Then some tax collectors come up to him, who are notorious for being dishonest in their dealings with people. *"Teacher, what shall we do?"* *"Collect no more than you are authorized to do,"* he replies. Soldiers, either through foolish bravado or genuine repentance approach him next: *"And we, what shall we do?"* *"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."*

There's a theme in all these. For one thing, all of these instructions are financial in nature, highlighting the fact that repentance includes a complete reorientation of values. In focusing on our pocketbooks, John's inviting us to give ourselves fully to the one in whom we're baptized. Our well-being, our safety, our security, are no longer in our own hands or our earning potential. Instead, our whole selves are entrusted to the one we follow. We value what he values, we invest in what he invests in, we take care of others as though they're just as valuable and worthy of clothing and food as we are.

And that brings us to another thing: not only is this true repentance financially costly...it's also neighborly. Our repentance to God includes a horizontal dimension. The way we treat one another is transformed. We don't defraud our neighbor, we clothe him. We don't extort the vulnerable, we protect them. We don't fantasize about all that we could do if we just doubled or tripled our salaries, instead we receive what we have with joyful gratitude. Whatever excess we might have is given to the one with lack and our imagination is fixated on God's Kingdom rather than our own.

Maybe this is only my tendency, so this is vulnerable to share. But my tendency in coming to this passage is to transform a very practical teaching into a very abstract teaching so that it doesn't make me too uncomfortable. I take John's very concrete call to give your backup tunic to your neighbor who has no tunics and I turn it into a lesson like, "be generous." But I'm still left with the unsettling fact that in my closet, I may have no tunics...but I sure have a lot of other kinds of clothes. What's more, I have a savings account that, while no means huge, is dedicated entirely to hypothetical situations. And at the same time, I'm aware that millions of my neighbors in the world do not have enough for their real lives today. I'm not saying that we should only have one outfit that we wear every day or that having savings is sinful. What I'm saying is that sitting and meditating on this passage has made me deeply uncomfortable over the past few weeks. I'm asking myself, "do I take this seriously enough? Am I reckoning with John's practical call to repentance? And, if I'm hesitant to do what he's saying, could that mean that I'm not practically be trusting in Jesus as much as I think?" For me, it's easy to gloss over the "*collect no more than you are authorized to do*" and "*do not extort anyone by threats or by false accusations.*" But bookending this section at the beginning and end are similarly challenging calls to exercise active faith in Jesus. Those two calls? 1) "If you have two tunics, give to the person who has none" and 2) "be content with your wages." These are challenging exhortations!

And as we consider this whole-sale re-evaluation of our values in repentance, we see a clear picture of this in the life of Zacchaeus. There may be no better picture of lived repentance than that of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Zacchaeus was clearly a man transformed by Jesus. He had been a chief tax collector, and quite wealthy, which likely meant he had become skilled at

“collecting more than he was authorized to do.” He was good at it! One day, he encountered Jesus. We don’t know when Zacchaeus’ heart was transformed. Was it when he was so interested in seeing Jesus that he decided to scale a tree? Was it when he joyfully received Jesus into his home? Was it when he decided to give half his wealth to the poor and make financial reparations to those he had defrauded? We don’t know when his heart changed. All we know is what Jesus says to him, *“Today salvation has come to this house.”* It’s not obvious exactly when Zacchaeus was changed. What’s obvious, though, is that he changed. He bore fruits in keeping with repentance. His life testified to his inner joy in Jesus. John the Baptist is inviting his listeners (and us) to a similar experience.

And we may be asking the question, “wow, this seems like a lot. And honestly, it seems like kind of a bummer? Why did we come out to the Jordan just to get chewed out and challenged by John the Baptist?” But verses 15-18 show us not just the need of repentance or the fruits of repentance, but also **the treasure of repentance**. If all we know of John the Baptist’s message is the action steps that he points us to, we don’t know the message of John the Baptist. The point isn’t a to-do list or even a call to sacrificial love for our neighbor. John’s message is much grander and more majestic than that.

For one thing, “what then shall we do?” isn’t the only question that the crowds ask upon hearing John’s teaching. We see them ask, in verse 15, whether John could be the Christ, the Anointed One, the long-foretold Savior of the world. He must have made quite an impression on them...his values so different from the values of the surrounding culture. His commitment to his message was impressive. His whole lifestyle was distinct, jagged, note-worthy. “Is this the guy?” And John doesn’t even hesitate for a moment. *“I’m baptizing you with water, but HE who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

These words from John aren’t false modesty nor are they slick hyperbole. He really means it and it really is true. If all we got was John the Baptist and no Savior following his ministry, we’d be in the same state we started in. We’d be no better off than we were before. A

wonderful and interesting guy, but whose life does not reach forward 2,000 years and influence ours if there's no Savior that comes after him. But because there was one who came after John, his devotion to his message was not in vain. There would be one mightier than him. Infinitely more worthy of praise and adoration. There would be one whose baptism would not just be water, but would be of the Holy Spirit and fire! As helpful as water baptism is for identification in the covenant community and for a representation of Christ's work on our behalf, it doesn't hold a candle to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. God Himself lives within us? God Himself guides us, encourages us, convicts us, advocates for us, empowers us, enlightens us? What an incredibly powerful gift that is...what an opportunity! We not only get to know the Almighty God and be known by him, but we get to be animated by him...a reality so profoundly realized that the Apostle Paul states that, *"it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* Those who repent of their sins and turn to their Savior receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit (in which we are empowered) and fire (in which we are purified). We get to be transformed from the inside out.

What incredible news for those who will receive it! We are not our own and we are not on our own. Instead, we belong to Christ and his Spirit fills us as we go about seeking to follow him. We're not left to our own devices and left to make whatever of our lives we can according to our own strength. Instead, we get to receive baptism of water, signaling our identification with Christ and his church. We receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit, signaling the presence of God not just in the circumstances of our lives but in us ourselves. And we receive Jesus' baptism of fire, signaling the ongoing sanctification, purification, and pruning of all that is poisonous within our own hearts.

All this ought to be a tremendous encouragement to the one who believes in it. But John doesn't end there...he returns to a similarly frightening theme from the beginning of his message. The chaff will be burned, the ones who are not enlivened by the Spirit are cast into a fire. Instead of this fire purifying them, the fire consumes them. This coming Messiah that John is pointing towards is the initiator of this Day of Judgment. Those listening are called to abandon their complacency, to flee their procrastination, to divest themselves of their numbing comforts, to despoil themselves of what they once treasured, and ready themselves. It is a

sober call to repentance. And we have to wonder about verse 18 that kind of snuck into the reading. “*So with many more exhortations he preached good news to the people.*” Huh? Good news? In what way is this good news? Didn’t he just warn of coming judgment? Isn’t the Messiah on his way with a winnowing fork? I wasn’t even sure what a winnowing fork was when I first read that, but I knew that I didn’t want to be at the wrong end of it.

I believe this short verse is the interpretive key to the whole passage! Reading this without paying attention to this detail is like having a bank account with a million dollars in it but forgetting the PIN code. Missing this is missing that part at the end of the Sixth Sense about the dead people. The whole passage hinges on this crucial point: what John the Baptist is proclaiming is good news. The warning to be prepared. The call to full-life repentance. The painful fruits of repentance. All of this is good news because the one for whom we are preparing is good. The one for whom we are preparing can do a number on the demolished ruins of our once-impressive houses. All the tearing down and destruction was preparation for the gentle and tender renovation of Jesus Christ. He is building a living temple...a structure built specifically with God’s presence in mind. God’s presence may be terrifying, but what could we want more than God Himself? Are we content with anything less than Him?

This message of judgment is one of good news because of the one to whom it’s pointed, but we can get even more specific. This message of judgment is good news because, as Fleming Rutledge points out in her wonderful book on the crucifixion...the line between the wheat and the chaff isn’t just between groups of people (sheep and the goats) on the last day. “The line runs through each person,” she states. The line, between chaff and wheat, isn’t just separating the groups of wheat from the groups of chaff on the future Day of Judgment. The line runs through each of us. At the same time we are both saint and sinner. The message of a purifying fire is a message of hope, that Jesus will lovingly and firmly take away from our own hearts that which is self-destructive. We remember our reading from Malachi last week: *he is like a refiner’s fire*. Fire is bad news for the one who has built their life and identity around chaff. But for those who have recognized the chaff of their life, the worthlessness of sin and the surpassing value of Christ...the purifying fire is good news.



This Advent season, we are being called again to ready ourselves, to prepare for the coming Savior. But this waiting doesn't necessarily feel like sipping hot chocolate on Christmas Eve, waiting eagerly for the sentimental fun of it all. It can feel painful like waiting for your coach to tell you that you can get out of the wall sit that you've been holding. The cost of Christian waiting is high. It demands all of what you are, even the most tender, sensitive, and personal parts of you. It demands repentance which is, by its nature, humbling and uncomfortable. But while the cost is high, the reward of Christian waiting could be no greater. It is Jesus Himself in all his splendor and majesty, truth and grace, gentleness and holiness. There is no greater treasure than him. The best of us isn't even worthy to untie his sandals! How great and mighty he is.

As we consider his majesty, it would be helpful to ask ourselves several questions that will help prepare us for the Messiah, Jesus.

- Am I gripping anything so tightly that my hold on it is keeping me from clinging fully to Jesus?
- Am I coming to Jesus this Advent season in a spirit of humble expectancy or in a spirit of comfortable entitlement?
- Is it possible that I'm holding Jesus at arm's length in some regard, worried about the pressure points he'll inevitably press if he approaches too close?
- In the back of my mind, do I feel that if Jesus really had his way in my life that I would be ruined?

I invite you, fellow sinner and fellow participant in the grace of God, to allow the full weight of your worries and expectations...your "hopes and fears" to land squarely on Jesus, unmediated by your own sense of control and self-rulership. Let us despoil ourselves of all those sinful riches that in the light of Christ reveal themselves to be worthless chaff. And let us feast ourselves on the goodness and mercy of our Lord. Amen.