

Homily for Advent 3, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

'The ministry of John the Baptist'

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INTRODUCTION

Today our text sets before us John the Baptist,
and the message he brought in preparation for the coming of Jesus.

I wonder what your reaction is to John the Baptist and his preaching?

In watched a number of people this week as we read it together raise their
eyebrows and take a deep breath.

I think for most of us,
John and his message are a bit unsettling.

This strong, direct, fiery, even harsh preaching can make us uncomfortable.

Especially when we're in that time of the year when we're busy decorating
houses,
engaging in all sorts of festivities,
getting into the so-called Christmas spirit,

John the Baptist can feel like a bit of an unwelcome intruder.

But guess what?

That's exactly how people reacted to him in his own time.

He is a bit of an intruder,

but he'd God's intruder.

The question for us is whether we're willing allow his message to intrude into our lives today?

Let's note three main things John does in this text:

1. John *confronts* self-righteousness,
2. he *calls* for the fruit of repentance,
3. and he *confesses* the greater one to come.

John **confronts**,
John **calls**,
John **confesses**.

JOHN CONFRONTS SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

So first we see how John *confronts*.

It's quite a beginning to his sermon isn't it?

'You brood of vipers!'

Imagine you went along to hear a new pastor preach and he opened his sermon by saying,

'You bunch of poisonous snakes!'

This would never get past proof-reading at seminary,
Let me tell you!

In fact,
some suggest it might even be stronger than we think,

because who was the first snake-like creature in the Bible?

The serpent,
the devil himself,
so this could even be a way of calling them 'children of the devil',
just as Jesus says elsewhere.

But why is John so strong?
What is the situation he wants to *confront* head on?

Essentially, it's that old problem of self-righteousness,
pride,
the unrepentant spirit.

*'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...
bear fruit worthy of repentance...
and don't begin to say we're children of Abraham...
God can make those out of stones if he wants...'*

John is all about repentance.

He called all people to confess their sins,
to turn to God,
to re-orient their lives,
and to undergo his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But John saw in the crowds that gathered around him an attitude which
thought,
'that this may be all well and good for others',
but I don't actually need it.

It was an insincere repentance at best,
especially due to a false security in their family heritage from Abraham.

Now they *were* God's chosen people,
he had committed himself to them,

but then some began to draw the false conclusion that it didn't really matter
how they lived,
repentance and faith weren't central,

they thought their family heritage meant they were had repentance-exempt
status.

John needs to confront this strongly,
because it is really the most serious spiritual problem.

Jesus even went so far as to say that he really doesn't have to anything to offer
the self-righteous,
that he hasn't come for them,
*'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.
I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance'*. Luke 15:7

Don't think you can't fall into the same trap.

Many of you here have grown up in families which have been Christian,
And even Lutheran,
For generations.

On the one hand,
This is a great blessing.

The faith has been passed down to you just as St Paul says it was from Lois to
Eunice to the young pastor Timothy.

But on the other hand,

There are particular spiritual traps in this.

Where you begin to think that because of your family heritage,
Or your denominational affiliation,

you develop something of a false spiritual confidence in that heritage,
and neglect the personal need for repentance and faith.

The simple fact of the matter is,
that as good a Lutheran Christian man or woman as your grandfather or
grandmother was,

they cannot repent and believe for you,
that must confront the heart of every individual.

If God can raise up children of Abraham from stones he can certainly raise up
Lutherans for stones.

And he says to those who come out to him with this insincere repentance,
This false assurance,
This pride and self-righteousness,
It's like there's a barren fruit tree,
And an axe lying there,

And the farmer is getting ready to cut that tree down and throw it into the fire.

There's an urgency to this message.

So John confronts the self-righteousness in each of our hearts,
and calls us to repentance.

JOHN CALL FOR FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

Second then,
John calls for fruit worthy of repentance.

Given the fiery harsh tone of John's preaching,
It's remarkable that people respond:

They say,
'What should we do?'

John has challenged them to demonstrate in their deeds that their repentance
is genuine,

So they ask about some specifics.

Interestingly,
They are all about attachment to things of this world in one way or another.

He begins by telling those with two coats,
Or those with plenty of food,
to be generous to those who don't have these things.

This is very simple, practical teaching on loving your neighbour as yourself.

Now I don't know how many sets of clothes you have in your wardrobe,
but I've certainly got a lot more than two!

One of the fruits of repentance is that we are not to be so attached to material
things that we can't bear to share with those in need.

Then a few specific groups come to John,
He tells the tax-collectors not to be greedy but to be honest in their work.

He tells the soldiers to be content with their wages,
and not to use the power of their position to get money out of people.

Here's what is really striking in this.

John is in the desert,
with a group of disciples,
and the crowds are flocking to him,

but when people ask him what *they* should do,
he doesn't say, '*Come out to desert with me*'.

Instead, he calls them to go back into their everyday life,
and to allow this fruit of repentance to be worked out there.

This is even more interesting given that in that context both tax collectors and soldiers were suspect professions for various reasons.

So when they ask what *they* should do,
we might have expected that John would say,
'*well to start with, you've got to get another job*'.

I mean that whole industry is so tainted that you just have to get out of there.

And there are cases when Christian people feel they can no longer continue in certain professions in good conscience.

But here John's first call is to go back to where you are.

He sends the tax collectors and soldiers back into that place where they are as *transformed* people,
and he says,
'be a good, honest tax-collector,

be a fair and contented soldier'.

That's what it means to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

And think about your own life,
Can't this often be the more difficult path to take?

Out there with John,
that would've been exciting, extra-ordinary sort of work,
things were happening,
there was a buzz,

but to be sent back into ordinary life to bear fruit *there*,
that's tough.

Can you imagine those tax collectors or soldiers having to stand up to their
mates when they refused to join in taking a bribe,
Or when they stood up to their colleague who was involved in extortion by
threat,

I don't think that would've gone down too well.

A part of this teaching is that each vocation has its particular temptations and
besetting sins,
As well as it's particular opportunities for good works.

When God works in our life and we want to know what to do,
The first question is to ask:
Where does God have me now?

That's where you start.

JOHN CONFESSING THE COMING ONE

So first John *confronted* the proud and self-righteous.

Then he *calls* for fruit worthy of repentance.

Finally, John *confesses* the greater one to come.

John's ministry was evidently so powerful,
that some actually began to wonder if he himself might be the Messiah.

At another time there was a delegation coming to ask him this exact question.

But John responds by saying,
no no no,
you think there's some power in *my* ministry,

I'm nothing compared to what's coming after me.

He says,
You know how a slave gets down on the dirty floor on his hands and knees to
untie his master's sandals?

The one coming after me is so great,

that I'm not even worthy to do that,
not worthy to be called his slave.

I'm baptising in water,
He's coming to baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John's work *prepared* the way for God's saving work,

Jesus actually brought it about.

John was like the nurse taking your blood pressure and getting you prepped,
Jesus is the surgeon.

Or to use John's imagery,

John's the farmhand getting things ready,
But the harvest belongs to Jesus.

John says,
*'his winnowing fork is in his hand,
To clear out his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary,
But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'* (v 17).

This is a picture of judgment,

That when the Messiah comes there will be a separation and a judgment.

Those who repent and turn to God are gathered to him,
Those who refuse are judged, condemned,
Separated off into dreadful eternal punishment.

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But then in the Gospel after our text,
Things take a somewhat surprising turn.

Because what happens next,
Is that this greater one John confesses,
actually, comes to **be** baptised **by** John.

The one who is coming as judge,

Himself stands in solidarity with sinful humanity.

John warns of the wrath to come,
and that this 'coming one' would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Then later in Luke's Gospel Jesus says:

*'I came to cast fire on the earth,
and how I wish it were already kindled,
I have a baptism to be baptised with – (another baptism!)
and how great is my distress until it is accomplished'.*

He's talking about his death on the cross,
his fiery baptism of blood.

There's something strange here!

The one John says is so much greater and more powerful and is coming in
judgment,
He himself is on the path to be judged,
To die.

Do you begin to see how this all mysteriously fits together in the Gospel?

The one who will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire,

first,
he takes on himself the fiery wrath of God's just judgment on our sins.

He undergoes - for you,
a baptism on the cross.

John prepares the way by his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of
sins,

And Jesus in his death actually brings about that forgiveness of sins.

No make no mistake,
the urgency of repentance is still there for all people,
the axe is still laid to the root of the tree in every generation,
and the unquenchable fire Jesus speaks of is still there for those who reject
him.

But for you who are baptised into him and trust in Christ Jesus the greater one,

You have received in your baptism,
The purifying and all-encompassing work of the Holy Spirit of God,

And the forgiveness of all your sins.

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CONCLUSION

John **confronts** sin and self-righteousness,
John **calls** for fruit worthy of repentance in our vocations,
and John **confesses** the greater coming one who is Christ our Saviour.

May God's messenger John the Baptist and his words intrude into our lives
again this day.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.