

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent – Year C  
December 13, 2009  
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY  
Luke 3:7-18  
Paul Horn

Pastor

“Produce Fruit in Keeping with Repentance”

<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

<sup>11</sup> John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

<sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

<sup>13</sup> “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

<sup>14</sup> 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.”

<sup>15</sup> The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Lutherans are odd people. They’re the only group of folks who will offer you a cup of hot coffee when it’s 89 degrees out and 90% humidity. They’re the only ones who would hold a potluck every Sunday if given permission. And the joke is true: how many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? None, because Lutherans don’t like change. And if you ask a Lutheran what they’re favorite season of the church year is, they will not say Christmas or Easter. A Lutheran’s favorite seasons of the church year are Advent and Lent, which is strange, because during these two seasons you will hear the strongest preaching of the law. They are also seasons for repentance. Lutherans love the preparatory seasons of Advent and Lent because we see the necessity of repentance as we prepare for Christmas and Easter. We know that we are truly ready for the coming of our King, not through shopping, decorating, letters and baking cookies, but through repentance. Last week we looked at repentance. This week will look at repentance again, but from another point of view. We hear these words from John the Baptist in our lesson from Luke 3, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

God called John the Baptist to preach a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. The gospels tell us that the whole Judean countryside came out to John at the Jordan River to be baptized. He pointed out their sins. They showed sincere sorrow for those sins. He pointed them to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. They then received forgiveness through the special means that God provides in Holy Baptism.

Another group of people went out to the Jordan to be baptized, the religious leaders of the Jews, the Pharisees and Sadducees. But as he saw them approach, John addresses them rather harshly, **“You brood of vipers!** In other words, “You offspring of snakes!” And it was true. They were the products of poor teaching by the Jewish rabbis and teachers of the law, who had been teaching the people that to get right with God they must focus on their good works. This actually made them offspring of the ancient serpent. John speaks harshly to them again, **“Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”** In other words, “Do you really think you can escape God’s final judgment by pretending to be sorry for sins and pretending to desire baptism for forgiveness of sins?”

God had given John a special gift; the insight to see their hearts. He saw that the hearts of the Jewish religious leaders were full of hypocrisy. They were deceivers just like the ancient serpent. They saw the results of John’s preaching. They recognized that this was a popular spiritual movement among the people. They wanted to appear to be in favor of it and not lose their positions of power and influence among the people. But they had no desire to be forgiven through baptism. They had no desire for true repentance. They intended to continue in their prideful ways. And so John continued to speak harshly to them, **“The ax is already laid at the root of the tree.”** Be warned! Your tree is ready to be chopped down, just like a tree that doesn’t bear fruit, so also those who give no evidence of repentance should understand the severity of their situation with God; judgment is imminent!

This is very harsh language. Was John being mean spirited? Was he sinning? Not at all. He was preaching God’s Word, specifically the full severity of the Law, and for a good purpose. By making them stare face-to-face with their sin, he hoped that they would see how gross it was, and turn from it, and turn back to God for the forgiveness of sins. John wanted to turn these men from death to life.

Would you feel offended if I told you all that you were a bunch of hypocrites? Or if I called you a brood of vipers? Would you be offended if I told you that John was speaking these words to you and me as well? You might respond, “How could you do that? We’re not hypocrites! We’re sitting here in church today and some of us intend to stay for Bible Study!”

As good Lutherans you know what to expect on Sunday morning. You publicly confess your sins. But then you know what to listen for; the pastor giving the absolution from God himself. But the hypocrite in all of us has no intention of turning from those sins we just confessed. You know that you’ll hear a sermon. If you’ve been sitting in this church for the past five years you know what you’re going to hear from me, as you would from any faithful Lutheran preacher; the preaching of the law and gospel. You know that the pastor will convict your heart with the law, point out your sin, and you make you feel uncomfortable. But then you know to listen for the gospel that I will “live happily ever after,” forgiven by Jesus. But we have no intention of doing anything to curb those sinful behaviors that made us squirm in our seats. We expect to receive the body and blood of the Lord Jesus on the first and third Sunday of every month and on the high festivals of the church year. We come to the altar weary and burdened, and after receiving Christ’s body and blood, we feel better, we know we are right with God. But we have no

intention of going out and living like it. We walk out those doors like a dead tree, with no fruits to show that we have been forgiven.

Some of you have no intention of coming back next Sunday. You are satisfied with your once a month, sporadic attendance. You repent of those sins against the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment, but have no desire to do anything about it. In last week's sermon we repented of our sins of allowing the busyness of the Christmas season to interfere with our time spent with God. But did you do anything about it this week? Did you change your schedule? Did you flip off the TV for a minute or did you continue to rob God of time spent with him in his Word? In last week's sermon we talked about sins that are specific to you and you alone. We acknowledged them as serious offenses against God, embarrassing! We heard the proclamation of forgiveness, but we went back home and did it all over again.

I'm not speaking about the person who struggles with a particular sin, even to the point of losing that struggle more than winning. I'm talking about the person who is apathetic about sin. I'm talking about the person who is "okay" with sin. And it doesn't take much to find someone who fits that description. Sometimes all it takes is a mirror with my own image staring back at me to find someone who needs to hear the call to repent. Sometimes all it takes is a mirror to find someone who doesn't seem to grasp that hell is real and permanent and God's righteous answer to our sinfulness.

Those are harsh words, Pastor Horn! Do you hear the words that are coming out of your mouth? Yes I do, for I preached them to myself before I took the pulpit this morning. They are God's Words, and they have convicted my guilty heart, and have struck terror in my conscience...

When we know that we're sinners... is there any better news than to hear that Jesus "purchased and won [you] from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death" (Apostles' Creed, Second Article, Luther's Small Catechism)? When you feel the flames of hell singeing your feet, is there any better news than the shower of God's love and forgiveness that he gave you at your baptism? When you finally recognize that sin has trapped you in its snare, is there any better news than the arrival of Jesus Christ, God's "eternal Son, whose advent has our freedom won" (CW 16:5)? When you feel the spiritual starvation of your sinful ways, is there any better news than the Savior's invitation, "Take, eat, and drink. This is my body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins"?

Faith hears those promises and believes. Faith holds on to those promises to quiet the guilty conscience, to soothe the conscience that has been struck with terror, to raise up the despairing sinner and our grief turns to joy. As Paul said in second lesson, "**Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again, rejoice!**" Now that I have been forgiven, what can I do to show my thanks? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

The crowds that went out to John the Baptist wondered the same thing. We've been forgiven, now what? John said, "If you have two tunics, share a tunic with someone who doesn't have one!" (A tunic was the undergarment in those days). Tax collectors asked him, "What should we do?" John replied, "Don't be cheats. Don't collect more than you're supposed to!" Soldiers

came to him. John said, “Don’t be involved in extortion. Don’t take bribes. Be content with your pay!”

Just as a tree bears fruit, so also a Christian will bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Now, it’s important for me to point out that fruits of repentance are not part of repentance. Good works follow repentance. God does not postpone forgiveness of our sins until he can examine our good works. He sees your broken and contrite heart. He sees your faith looking to him for forgiveness. He treats you as his dear child, not laying a single sin to your charge. He then waits for good works to follow as fruits, which he accepts as our thanksgiving and in which he rejoices in spite of their imperfections. Fruits naturally follow. You can’t gauge sincerity of repentance by looking at the fruits. You cannot put regulations on fruits of repentance, but some fruits are obvious.

A boyfriend and girlfriend are shacking up. Their sin has been pointed out. They repent. A fruit of repentance would be that they move out or get married. Someone has been guilty of abuse of alcohol, drugs, or pornography addiction. A fruit of repentance would be to pour it down drain, flush it down toilet, get help, not put yourself in a situation where you would be tempted by it. In the movie *Fireproof*, the lead character took a baseball bat to his PC in the driveway. Not because he was frustrated with Microsoft, but he had gotten rid of his porn addiction. Gossiping is a tough one, because you cannot put duct tape around your mouth. How do you show fruits of repentance? You defend a person who is being slandered. When you’re in a group of people who are gossiping you walk away and say, “I’m not gonna’ be part of this.” Husbands and wives, you know that being harsh with your spouse ruins the gift of companionship God has given you in marriage. The nit picking and arguing is sinning. You’ve repented, received forgiveness, now what? What does God say? He tells us, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church. Wives, respect your husbands, as the Church submits to Christ.” (Eph 5). Children...you know that it’s a sin to sass back to your parents, to complain and whine and grumble when you do your chores. You’ve said sorry for those sins, been forgiven, now what? Gladly obey your parents, speak to them with respect, and honor and love them. You’re guilty of sporadic worship and Bible study attendance? Guilty of allowing the busyness of your schedule to shut out daily time spent with God? You’re sorry for breaking the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment. You’ve repented. You’ve received absolution from God. Now, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Make a determined effort to come back every week. Change your schedule to allow God to speak to you through his Word every day. Stick to those good spiritual habits. This is fruit what God will be happy to see on your spiritual tree. He will gladly accept it as a thank you for his gift of forgiveness through his Son Jesus. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Lutherans are strange creatures. All the standing and sitting, sitting and standing, singing hymns from the 1500s. All this talk about coffee and potlucks and their favorite seasons of the church year are Advent and Lent? Yes! It’s the time to hear the strongest preaching of the law, a time to repent, and for good reason. We are preparing for the King. We are waiting with great anticipation for the coming of our King, so that we might celebrate his birthday, his life, death, resurrection with humble and penitent hearts. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Amen.