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## **The Third Sunday in Advent**

**December 12, 2021**

### **When the Lord Comes Near He Leads Us to Genuine Repentance**

Ridding our hearts of sinful distractions is critical as we prepare for the Savior's coming, whether he comes at Christmas or in his Word or at the end of time. But repentance is more than saying the right words. In today's Gospel John the Baptist explains that genuine repentance includes doing the right things and believing the right promises.

#### **Sermon Luke 3:7-18**

**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? 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. 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."**

**"What should we do then?" the crowd asked.**

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

**Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"**

**"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.**

**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."**

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 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. 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." And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.**

#### **The Batteries Are Included**

I bet you have a flashlight in your house somewhere. You probably don't use it all that often. Maybe the kids or grandkids use the flashlight to play games, but the reason that you keep the flashlight around is because you know that when you need a flashlight, you need a flashlight. It is invaluable. Let's imagine that you go and get a brand-new flashlight. It's packaging says that it is brighter than any other commercial flashlight and that the light can stay on for 48 hours on battery. So, you bring it home, toss it in the junk drawer and don't think about it. Then the power goes out. Never fun, but at least you are prepared. You go into the drawer, grab this amazing flashlight, and turn it on... except it doesn't turn on. When it is light out again, you look closely at the packaging and it says, "Requires 2 AA batteries. Sold Separately." Seriously?! What good is a flashlight when the batteries are not included? Or even if they are, what good is a flashlight with dead batteries? It's just a paperweight when you are in the dark looking for light and there is no light coming from your flashlight.

The people of Israel were kind of like a dead flashlight. They had been chosen, starting with Abraham, as the people of God. It was through this nation that the world would be blessed. It was to this nation that God revealed himself on Mt Sinai. It was to this people that God had given his holy law. And it was this nation that seemed to ignore God's promises and the purpose of his laws. When John the Baptist came on the scene, he looked at a nation that didn't bother keeping the spirit of God's law, but only followed the letter of the law. And in their rigid legalism, they had lost faith. This is a broad generalization. There were, of course, people in the nation of Israel who still had faith in their Lord and who worshipped and praised him. But for the most part, the faith of the nation of Israel had gone cold. It was like the batteries that powered their faith had died and all that was left was an empty shell.

John was not content with this coldness, however. He wanted to preach life back into the people. To do that, though, meant that he had to reveal to them the dire state of affairs. This is why he had such harsh words for them. When he saw the people coming out to be baptized by him, he said **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"** These are harsh words. When he looked at their outward actions, he could tell that they had no fruit of repentance. He knew that they were headed for condemnation, and he warned them sternly about it! This is what John had been sent to do, after all. John had been sent to warn people of the coming of Jesus, to prepare not just for his first coming, but for the time when Jesus would come to judge the living and the dead. He took no joy in telling them that they would be like trees that weren't producing fruit, that God would chop them down and throw them into eternal fire. That is what God does with humans who do not have faith – he chops them down and throws them into an eternal blaze. And John points to the fruit of faith. Without fruit, the roots are dead and there is no faith. It is kind of like a battery in a flashlight: without a battery, a flashlight is useless in its main and most important function.

How does hearing John's words make you feel? Do you hear, **"Brood of vipers"** and think, "That might be me?" What do you think when you hear, **"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?"** We know that we have not produced the kind of fruit that we could have. We look back on years of missed opportunities, of rotten fruit, and of downright sinful behavior and it is easy to feel the heat from that fire being warmed. Are we just a brood of vipers? Do we simply rest on the laurels of our ancestry and of our past "works" even though we know that it is not what God wants of us? Our sinful natures are constantly there, trying to lull us into a sense of security as if we have done enough.

What more can we do when we see this incident than say with those crowds that came to John, **"What should we do then?"** John's answer was to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. It might seem like John is recommending that the people do good works to hold off the judgment and wrath of God, but that is not what he is saying. Instead, he has in view the whole of Christian life, which starts with Christ. Luke mentions this a few verses down. In verses 15 and 16, when the people think that he might be the Messiah, he insists that he is not, but that the Messiah is coming soon, and he is coming both with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus has the power to bring people from death to life. John was baptizing with God's Word and his baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, but he was merely an instrument. Jesus, on the other hand, Jesus was the very one who was able to send the Holy Spirit. He was the one who could, by his own power and will and work, bring a person back from the dead. And that is just what Jesus came into the world and did. Jesus came to save sinners. He came to bring faith into people's hearts, and he gives his Holy Spirit as the power to create and sustain that faith. The batteries are included with the gift of Jesus: The Holy Spirit is the power for the whole Christian life.

John came to assure people that God had forgiven their sins. But first, John had to convince people of their sins. We know that we have sinned, but we are also convinced that God has forgiven those sins by the sacrifice of Christ. It was by Christ's perfect sacrifice that we brought from spiritual death to life, and it was in this spiritual life that we also have the hope of bodily life in eternity. It is through the perfect resurrection of Christ that we can be certain of our place before God. When God

looks at us, he no longer sees a brood of vipers or an orchard of unfruitful trees, but he sees us as Christ has made us: innocent and fruitful. Innocent because Christ has washed our sins away. Fruitful because Jesus has empowered us by his Holy Spirit to live lives in keeping with repentance.

God did not give us faith only for us to have to figure out how to power it. That would be like parents giving their children a toy without batteries and saying, "Good luck making it work!" That is not loving, and that is not what our God wants. He wants us to produce fruit and by the working of the Spirit in our hearts, that is what happens. Christians do good works. This is both a command, a promise, and a statement of fact. John the Baptist was not overwhelming people by what he taught, but they had been so inwardly focused that he was just reminding them what it was to love their neighbor again. Sometimes it is good for us to be reminded of what that love looks like. Let's take a quick look at his examples.

- 1) **"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."** A shirt was expensive, and usually the only piece of clothing a person could afford. There were no automated factories that could manufacture shirts at breakneck speeds. It was all done by hand. So, to not have a tunic meant to not have clothes. To have 2 would be a sign of wealth. He was asking that those who could afford it give to the poor. This is not beyond reason, and it is something that we can each consider: giving our extra to those who have none.
- 2) **"Tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them."** Tax collectors were given an amount to collect for the government, but they could ask for more and who would stop them? They were actors of the government. And the government was far more concerned with people not paying enough taxes than their collectors taking extra money, so most people just gave them whatever they asked for. John told them to be fair in their jobs. He didn't tell them to quit their jobs and find better, more honest career fields, he just told them not to cheat. This, too, makes good sense and is something that we can get behind. Do your jobs well. Do them to God's glory.
- 3) **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."** Even soldiers wanted his advice. The problem, it seemed, is that soldiers got into the habit of using their position and strength to extort people, to cheat them out of money. John didn't tell them that they shouldn't be in the military. But he encouraged them to be content with what they were given. A lesson that I think we all could be reminded of more often.

Be content, do your jobs well, and give your extra to those who have none. These seem like simple ways in which to serve God. There are some groups of Christians who proclaim that you need to have a special revelation from God to know what it is that God wants from you in your life. It would be nice if God sent us a letter with exact orders on how to carry out our lives. Instead, God gives us his Holy Spirit. He doesn't whisper the secrets of life into our ear, but he enables us to live every day as trees that produce fruit.

And when Jesus comes with that winnowing fork in his hand and he separates the wheat and the chaff, we can be confident that it is Christ who brings us into the barn because it was Christ who brought us back from being dead and fruitless into being alive and producing fruit.

It is good when batteries are included with flashlight, but batteries have a shelf life, they will lose their power eventually. Thank God that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us life and enables us to live that Christian life. The batteries are included when we are brought from death to life, and those batteries don't run out. Amen.