

## What Should We Do?

Luke 3:7 – 18

December 13, 2009

**Our scripture reading this morning comes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Luke, verses 7 through 18. Please listen for the reading of God's Word for His people.**

<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 axe 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.

**This is the Word of God and It can be trusted.  
Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray:

Oh Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the meditations of our hearts. Prepare us, oh Lord, your servants, for the receiving of Your Word. Open our eyes that we may see, our hearts that we may feel, our ears that we may hear and our minds that we may come to understand all that you have to offer us today. In Christ wonderful and holy name we pray. Amen!

Last week, our lectionary reading offered us an opportunity to meet John the Baptist; a voice of one crying in the wilderness. John, an eccentric fellow to say the least, comes to us with a familiar imagery; wild John, long-haired, dressed in the skins of wild animals, wandering the wilderness eating locust and honey crying out to the people – Repent – The Kingdom of God is at hand. Last week, it was at John's promise that

repentance would ensure that ‘all mankind [would] see God’s salvation’ we stopped and took pause, recognizing that the message of John, in and of itself, was more than a message of introduction, but was message of preparation. John was doing more than just introducing Jesus to the world; he was calling them to prepare for the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Verses 1 – 6 of the third Chapter of Luke’s gospel spoke to us about the need for preparation not only in our lives, but also John’s need to prepare a broken and misdirected world for the arrival of their long awaited Messiah.

John’s call to repentance encourages and equips us with a two step process to redemption, the first of which is a call to realize that without allowing God to direct our paths we are moving in the wrong direction; a realization that offers us an opportunity to make a course correction, that’s step 2. For the people to whom John was preaching, as well as for many of us today, this message was and is a real eye opener. Many of them were beginning to see, maybe for the first time in their lives, that the direction in which they were headed was not at all part of God’s plan. And so they were rushing to John in droves, asking him to teach them, to instruct them and to show them the path that God had laid out for them; a path that we together as a community of faith seek for one another each week.

Much of the research that I read concerning today’s passage concentrated their responses on the need and according to some, the appeal of judgment. Note this all spawns from John’s words at the beginning of today reading, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath . . . The axe 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.” However, in all that I read, not one placed any emphasis on verse 8; the command to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” By omitting this phrase, it is easy to see how many would conclude John’s message to be a call to judgment, but in keeping with John’s previous call to repentance, I don’t see this as judgment at all; at least not in the more modern use of the word that give fundamentalists a false sense of duty to preach hell fire and brimstone laced with condemnation.

According to Dr. Craig Barnes, he occasionally comes across an article that wrestles with the question of why so many people tune into television preachers who just scream at the camera. “There words are harsh,” he

states, “their warnings so severe. ‘Repent! You better repent or you will burn.’” Dr. Barnes calls this judgment preaching and equates this with John’s message to the people who came to see him in the wilderness. He goes on to say that people flocked to John because, like those who tune into the afore mentioned television programs, they know that it is a message that they deserve. Listen to his justification:

*Having been evaluated and measured from the day from which we were born; having to constantly hear the message ‘try harder’ from teachers, parents, employers and kids; having to face the sharpest of all critics, that same person who keeps showing up in the mirror every morning no matter how hard we try to make changes, in our hearts we know that our lives are not good enough.*

Not good enough? Of course were not good enough, that is the whole point to what John is trying to tell these people and what makes Christianity, for each of us, so different from other faiths. Judgment is not at the root of John’s message, rather the realization that we cannot do it on our own is. Through the message of John and his call to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” there comes the realization that we are not good enough, not worthy enough, and that our lives are not righteous enough for God. We realize this as truth, because it is the truth. We are not good enough for God. You see, whereas other religions say that they are the path to God, or that there are many paths to God; we protestant Christians believe that there is NO path to God. Despite our best laid plans, despite all our good intentions, despite all our best human efforts, we *cannot* make a path to God. Humanity is in big trouble; lost in the desert!

John isn’t preaching judgment; he is preaching that in your current state, a state that has you traveling outside the will and relationship of God, you are doomed. “The axe is already at the root of the trees,” John says, “and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” And which fruit is that? It is the “fruit in keeping with repentance.” If you are without God in control of your life today, then this message is as much for you as it was for those in the wilderness. In your current state, on the current path on which you are on, you are doomed; you will be cut off and cast into the fire . . . unless you do what? Repent.

This, I think is where the fundamentalist get it wrong. So many are quick to call for repentance at the threat of judgment that they forget to remind people that repentance is the good news that John is preaching

here. Our passage today ends with, “And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.” Judgment is not the good news. A promise of hell fire and brimstone for those who fail to turn from their wicked ways is not the good news. The good news is that there is one coming that will make the path to God for you, one who will offer us an opportunity to get on the path God has laid out for us. The good news is that though we cannot ourselves make a path to God, we can accept the one that God has laid out for us; a path that leads us to God and God to us.

The exhortations that John brought the people of the wilderness led them to an awareness of their sin, an awareness of their failure to walk in God’s will and way for them. John prepared the people for a message of hope, peace, joy and love – all of the themes which advent brings to us each year – a message that would prepare them for relationship and reconciliation; a message that brings us today into relationship with our God through the message of the now resurrected Christ.

And so we have repentance, step two. The call to turn around from the path the world has placed us on and to begin to walk with faith on the path God has prepared before us. Are you ready to walk that path today? Are you willing to turn around and let God lead you in his way and His will? The people in the wilderness asked John, “What should we do?” Simply stated, he told them to stop holding on to what they didn’t need and to give to those around them who were without. He told them to stop cheating, in essence to stop being dishonest with the world and with themselves and to turn to God. He instructed them to stop shaking people down for money and he called them to a two step process of repentance – know that you cannot make it on your own and turn around and let God direct your path. So if you are here this morning and find yourself asking the same question, “What should I do?” Then know that the answer for you is the same today as it was for the people John preached to in the wilderness. Accept this morning that you cannot do it on your own, turn around and let God direct your path.

As we sing our sermon hymn this morning entitled *He will come and save you* know that all you have to do today is to ask and He *will* come and save you. Please stand as you are comfortable this morning. During our sermon hymn I want you to pray with those around you this morning or if you like, come to the altar and

pray but please do not miss the opportunity this morning to accept the words of John the Baptist and the *good news* of Jesus Christ and begin walking on the path God has laid out before you. Glory be to the name of God, now and forever. Amen!