

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?”⁸ 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.⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ *“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.*

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

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

¹³ *“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.*

¹⁴ *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.”

¹⁵ *The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. (Luke 3:7-18)*

The Joy of Repentance

We probably use the word *joy* more in December than in any other month of the year. Christmas carols sing of “joy to the world” and “comfort and joy” and being “joyful and triumphant.” We hear those carols on our car radios and they become ear worms, running through our heads over and over again. Christmas cards have “joy” written in large, colored letters, often covered with glitter. And Christmas absolutely is a season of joy. But what about Advent? That’s the season we’re actually in right now. And while there is an undeniable “pre-Christmas” aspect to Advent, it’s also a season of repentance. Does it seem like those two ideas go together? When you think of repentance, do you usually think of joy? Or are you more likely to think of sorrow? As Christians, most of us probably consider repentance to be a good thing. But is it kind of like eating your vegetables? Something you have to do because it’s good for you, but you’d rather be eating ice cream? Well, hopefully, we realize that vegetables can actually taste good. Likewise, I hope that we all understand that repentance isn’t only about sorrow. In fact, in our gospel lesson for today, John the Baptist talks about repentance and he leads us to see **the joy of repentance.**

I.

Now that doesn’t mean there’s no sorrow involved. This morning, we have a snapshot of John’s preaching. This section shows us a fiery preacher. John says, **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”** That doesn’t sound like a ray of sunshine, does it? But John does go on to talk about “fruits of repentance” and to give guidance about those fruits to people in specific situations. John wanted to teach **the joy of repentance. But that joy is hidden behind sorrow over our sin.**

What is a “brood”? It’s a not very nice word for children. The Greek word used here means “offspring.” So when John called his listeners “a brood of vipers” he was calling them children of poisonous snakes. We might not consider that to be much of a zinger, but John goes on to tell them not to comfort themselves by thinking that they were the children of Abraham so they must be God’s chosen people. He said, **“Out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”** So rather than being the chosen ones, the children of the great founder, they were sneaking, poisonous snakes.

Why would he say that? Because they did not produce fruit in keeping with repentance. This is one of those points that is so simple you would think that it couldn’t be misunderstood. And yet, I find that people are incredibly good at sidestepping it. True repentance must produce fruits: it must produce a commitment to turn from that specific sin. But the people of John’s day wanted to be good Jews and make the right sacrifices and go through the right rituals and have their priests tell them they were forgiven, and then they wanted to go home

and continue on with the same comfortable, favorite sins. They didn't want to have to work hard at changing their lives. They didn't want to deal with all the emotional upheaval that facing our most comfortable sins brings.

You could say that they wanted to have the joy of hearing God say, "I forgive your sins" and they wanted the pleasure – the joy if you will – that they got out of committing those sins. Even in every day life, it doesn't work that way. Most of the time, real joy requires work and sacrifice. Having good health is a joy. But if the only exercise we do is potato chip curls, and we do several hundred reps a day, the pleasure we get from eating potato chips and washing them down with pop or beer, is going to make the joy of having a trim, fit body hard to reach – if not impossible. And we could apply that to a lot of other things, too. Having mature, well behaved children is a joy. But it's not a joy we're going to experience if we only satisfy our desire to get smiles from them, so we bribe our kids and in the process we spoil them, or if we constantly indulge our temper and scream and rant and rave at them without doing the hard work of teaching and forgiving. True joy in this life almost always hides itself behind hard work and discipline.

It is the same with repentance. Are we guilty of the same kind of attitudes that John the Baptist encountered? Do we think that if we come to church and ask for forgiveness, we can pretty much do whatever we want with the other 167 hours of the week? Do we think that giving two or three percent of our income pays for us to spend the other 97 or 98 percent in whatever selfish ways we want to? Do we think that God is lucky to have conservative, confessional Lutherans like us and forget that he could raise good Lutherans out of the stones? My friends, how much of our religious observance is about securing the joy of eternal life and how much is about making ourselves feel better so we can go back to thinking about ourselves and living our selfish, little lives for the rest of the week?

Not much joy in that, is there? But perhaps some truth. That truth is the path to real joy. Not the counterfeit joy that comes from engaging in sinful pleasures, but the true joy that comes from having the guilt of our sin removed, the joy that comes from knowing that God still loves us, the joy that comes only with the promise of eternal life with our loving Savior. That joy will last forever. That joy comes only through Jesus.

John pointed to Jesus when he called his people to repent. He called him **"one more powerful than I."** John could not rescue his people or change their sinful attitudes. Only Jesus can do that. Compared to Jesus, even the greatest of all human preachers isn't worthy to bend down and untie his dirty sandals. Jesus is the Son of God. But just like joy is hidden in the sorrow of repentance, Jesus hid his godhood in the body of a human being. He did that to win joy for you and me. The Son of God made himself nothing and went to the cross and suffered for all our sins. He paid for our guilty pleasures and all our attempts to avoid producing fruits of repentance. He took our place in death and hell and he rescued us. You and I have the same kind of joy that a person feels after firemen pull him or her from a burning building. We came so close to hell – but Jesus saved us. That is the joy of Advent. It is hidden in repentance, but that joy is yours today.

II.

The Bible teaches us that there is a proper time to be sorry. The book of James tells us to weep, mourn and wail. St. Paul speaks of godly sorrow. He goes on to say that there is a sorrow that leads to death – the despair that comes from not knowing Jesus is our Savior. But there is also a sorrow that God uses to lead us back to joy. It isn't being sorry about getting caught or about losing privileges. It's not the sorrow that only rages against the consequences. It's the sorrow of repentance, the sorrow that knows that I have disappointed the God who loves me. That sorrow leads us back to Jesus who took all that sin away. From the joy Jesus gives us comes those fruits of faith. So there is a very real **joy of repentance. That joy is expressed in a new and holy life.**

John the Baptist gave instructions about that life to those who repented and wanted to change their lives. That desire itself is the first fruit of repentance. The crowd asked, **"What should we do then?"** John said, **"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."** When God blesses us with wealth and prosperity, one fruit of repentance is to share with those in need. In our very middle class existence, that can be a difficult part of living our faith – and yet, I see Christians do this regularly. John told tax collectors not to collect more than they were owed and soldiers to be content with their pay and not extort money or accuse people falsely. These things are a little harder for us to understand. The Romans didn't have an IRS. They subcontracted tax collection out to private citizens in a specific area. The Romans said how much they expected to get. But they left the details up to the tax collectors who often

inflated the bill and got rich the process. Soldiers in the ancient world were not well paid, but they were well armed. They often engaged in outright robbery to get more money.

The details here really matter less than the life of faith and service. Instead of constantly seeking what I can get out of this life, the fruit of repentance is to be content with what God has given me and to use my time here and my resources for the good of others. There is real joy in that. Even unbelievers experience it. My wife's company does some kind of community service project every year and in general, the workers find it satisfying to help people. You see the same thing on TV when utility workers go to some area hit by a disaster to help restore power and water. Those workers talk about how great it is to help people. That joy is real because that is how God designed us. We are supposed to be an interconnected, mutually supporting network of people who help each other and find great joy in doing so. I think that even in heaven, we're going to have opportunities to serve each other. And it will be a real joy.

But in repentance there is an even greater joy than the satisfaction that we get from helping each other. It's the joy of serving our Savior. It's the joy of being like Christ. In the end, that is what our Christian life really is: an imitation of Jesus. We only want to imitate Christ because God has made us new. When we came to faith, God reached into our hearts and re-created us. He put a believer there. The New Testament calls that believer "the new man." That believer loves his Lord. That believer wants to serve Jesus and be like Jesus. That believer rejoices when he or she gets to express their faith in works of service to others.

In truth, every time we Christians serve others, we are serving Jesus. So every time a Christian mom or a dad walks the floor with a fussy baby or stays home from work to take care of a sick child, that is a fruit of faith. Every time a Christian wife fusses over her husband and lets him know how blessed she feels to have him, every time a Christian husband embraces his wife and makes sure she knows what a treasure she is to him, that is a fruit of faith. My friends, when we work hard at the jobs God gave us and do them well, when we study hard and make the most of our educational opportunities, those are fruits of faith. When we hold the door for a stranger with a cane or a walker, when we shovel the walk for the elderly person next door, when we write a check to help with disaster relief or we spend an afternoon helping to gather food for the homeless, all those things are fruits of our faith. They are a joy because Jesus' love shines through when we do them. You know what? They are a joy even if we don't feel particularly joyful about doing them because the Old Man, the unbeliever in our hearts, hates having to do stuff like that. The believer is still there and he still rejoices in serving his God.

John illustrates the joy of repentance with a tree. He says that God's ax is already at the root and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John lived in a dry country with limited resources. There wasn't that much good farm land and you couldn't let a fruit tree that didn't produce suck up water and fertilizer for nothing. We don't live in a country like that. But even for us, there is value in the illustration. Repentance brings forth fruit and that fruit is a joy. The tree can't produce fruit on its own. It needs water. It needs the nutrients in the soil. God gives those things. You and I are planted in the good news of Jesus Christ. That gospel is the water and the nutrients that feed our faith and bring forth fruits. But if a tree is the wrong kind of tree, it doesn't matter how good the soil is. We were all born the wrong kind of tree. We could never produce true fruits of faith because we had no faith. But Jesus changed us. He made us new. Now we are those beautiful fruit trees that bring forth the harvest God is looking for. Rejoice in what God has made you in Christ. Rejoice in the forgiveness that follows repentance. Rejoice in the fruits he brings forth. Rejoice in Jesus. Amen.