

January 5, 2024

Luke 3:1-14

I'm always brought to joy by each person that comes into this building to worship God on Sunday because I know that this is not the most convenient place in the world. I know that. This is an old building with no handicap accessibility. There's no parking lot- so you have to have good parallel parking skills. There's no A/C in the summer, so that's a factor. And yet, here you are, eager to hear the Word of God. Well, faithful Christians have often come to inconvenient places to hear God's Word. John the Baptist didn't preach from a pulpit in a beautiful cathedral. He didn't hand out bulletins. He preached out in the desert by the Jordan river. Blistering heat, rugged terrain, no shade, and yet people came to hear John preach. That's how good a preacher he was. But make no mistake- John was no nice-guy, "everything is hunky-dory," "God is nice, isn't that nice, let's be nice" kind of preacher. His message can be summed up in one word:

*"Repent!"* That's the theme, in fact, that's the Gospel today according to John- **Repent.**

**Repentance means... 1. You need good roots, so you can 2. Produce good fruits.**

**1. Good Roots.** Firstly, you need to notice exactly what John was doing. He was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Let's unpack that. The idea of "baptism" wasn't brand new to these people. The word, "*Baptizo*" in Greek literally just means to wash something with water, and the Jewish people had several "baptizing" rites. They would baptize their dishes and furniture to make it ceremonially clean. They would also have Gentiles, non Jewish men and women go through a similar baptism, a ceremonial washing, if they wanted to join God's people as a believer and worship in the synagogue with them. The idea is that Gentiles were dirty, not just on the outside, but on the inside, and they needed to be cleansed before they could properly worship the true God. And here, John is saying, "you're right! You too. You need to be cleansed, too." You can see this when John addresses the crowd not as, "My dear friends, or "my brothers and sisters," but, "You brood of vipers." Wow. Do you know what he's saying? These Jewish men and women, coming to hear him preach and to be baptized by him, he's saying, "You are are descendents of the ancient serpent who deceived Adam and Eve. You are children of the Devil." And then he says something fascinating- he addresses the false righteousness in the hearts of the typical Jewish believer at this time: "Don't say to yourselves that you have Abraham as your Father." You see, these people believed that they were saved by God because they were the right race- because they were the seed and children of Abraham. It was taught by the rabbis and religious teachers that no descendent of Abraham, no Jew could go to Hell. That was where their spiritual security came from- their race. And that made them not only scornful and resentful toward all other ethnic groups, it made them violent. They were deeply, horribly racist toward the Greeks, toward Romans, and especially toward the Samaritans who were part Jewish and part Gentile- they were filthy half-bloods. Do you see what's going on here? The biggest, most violent sins of these people often came from their ethnic pride- bad fruits of sin came from bad roots of ethnic self righteousness.

The same is true today. Why do we see the bad fruits of nastiness during November, and really all year because of politics? Because many people in our culture have the bad root of self-righteousness: “I am righteous, I am good because I vote for the right people and I’m on the right side of history,” and when you believe that- you will always feel deep hatred, or at least a very patronizing pity for those who aren’t as moral and sophisticated as you. Why do we see so much hypocrisy and fakeness in our culture- people live and die by people’s opinions and they lie to make themselves feel good? Because that bad fruit comes from the bad root of self-righteousness- “I am righteous because these people think I’m righteous.” Why do people stab each other in the back for a few extra dollars and slave away for that next car and hurt their loved ones for that next drink, that next hit, that next pleasure? Bad fruit comes from the bad root: “If I have this amount of money, if I have this drink and feel this pleasure and feel good, I will be enough and I will have what I’m missing.” And my friends, along with John the Baptist, I beg you- do not say these things to yourselves. Don’t even begin to say to yourselves, “I give this amount of money to church.” God can raise enough funds for his ministry from the ground. Don’t say, “I pray and live a decent life and try my best.” God can raise someone much more faithful and moral from the ground than you and me. Don’t say, “I’ve dedicated myself to God, that’s why I’m righteous. I’m so generous and kind.” God can raise up generosity and kindness from the ground. And I need to hear this too- don’t say to yourself, “I’m a pastor in God’s church and I’ve taught God’s saving truth to these people.” God could use the stones to preach his word and they’d likely be more eloquent than me. The reason we are so bitter and angry and rude and ruthless and prideful- all rotten fruits, is because our roots are bad and they need to be changed.

That’s what John provided. Baptism is a cleansing- not that you do for God- but something God does for and inside you. The solution is not fixing yourself, you and I are the problem- it’s God coming into us and changing us- giving us new roots. How? Isn’t God angry about our sins? Yes. Doesn’t he have to punish sin? Yes. Then how can you and I be forgiven and cleansed by God? Later on, John first saw Jesus walking in the midst of his people, and he proclaimed, “Look- the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus is that perfect sacrifice that was punished with God’s wrath in our place so that when we trust in him, we are forgiven. That’s what repentance is. Not simply feeling bad for your sins or vowing to change your life. It’s admitting that your roots, your heart is bad and that you need to not simply be instructed, but saved, forgiven, and changed, and then trusting in the one who earned forgiveness for you. That’s what repentance is. Repent, hate your sin, admit that you are rotten, and trust in Christ’s perfect life and death for you and you will be forgiven. That’s the Gospel according to John the Baptist. But there’s more.

**2. Good fruit.** John, along with the rest of Scripture, makes it abundantly clear that your good works are not what earn God’s love, God’s salvation- they don’t earn anything with God. You are saved completely by the grace of God, by the blood of Jesus shed for you, and it’s all a free gift. But does that mean your good works, your obedience to God’s commands are unimportant? Absolutely not. Look at what John says- *“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”* Well, how

can he say that? How can we say that we aren't saved at all by our works, and yet we are supposed to produce them? This is a question that has confounded Christians for a long time- how can we encourage people to trust not in what they've done for Jesus, but only in what Jesus has done for them, but then say that we still need to do good things and obey Jesus? The Lutheran Confessions, our book of theology, says it so beautifully well: "We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone." In John's language, and Jesus, Paul, and other parts of the Bible talk about it as well- we are all trees with nasty, rotten roots, and God comes in and gives us good roots, therefore, we are going to produce good fruit. Our good works that we do for God aren't the cause of our forgiveness, they are the result of our forgiveness. And look at how this plays out- the tax collectors come to John- men who were notorious for cheating people out of their wages, and weren't allowed to hear God's Word because they, according to the rabbis, were unforgivable- received this forgiveness of their sins- but then they ask, "What shall we do?" John tells them- don't cheat people. Even the Roman soldiers- men whom no one would ever expect to believe in John's message- they ask, "What should we do with this forgiveness that we have?" John doesn't say, "quit your job and preach in the desert like me." No, he says, "be content with your pay. Stop exhorting and falsely accusing people." And all the people who have received this forgiveness and out of thanks say, "What should we do," John doesn't give them anything extravagant or elaborate. Just be generous and kind and honest. The fruits of faith that God looks for don't have to be huge or extravagant or even seen by many. What makes fruits of repentance beautiful and true is the faith that produces them.

And I have to say this, God has richly produced some beautiful repentance and the fruits of repentance in this congregation, and we need to acknowledge and celebrate this fact. You need to realize this. When I see people faithfully brave the cold and the heat and the stairs because they love God's Word, and sacrifice time and effort to hear God's Word with their brothers and sisters, that's a fruit of repentance that brings God joy. When I see people donate food and time and hours so that we can have fellowship events, that's a beautiful fruit of repentance. When I see people donate their time and treasures and gifts so this church can function well, that's a beautiful fruit of repentance. When I see people respond with generosity to a family in need, and they even want to give anonymously because they just love the joy of giving, that's a beautiful fruit of repentance. There is some marvelous, beautiful fruit in this congregation. You and I should celebrate them for what they are- not anything that earns God's love, but a powerful witness, beautiful fruit that shows the beautiful roots that God has placed in the hearts of his people. These fruits show how good, how powerful God really is, that he can turn a brood of vipers, children of the Devil, into the beautiful trees with beautiful roots that produce beautiful fruit. So, friends, continue in this. Continue to repent- our lives are supposed to be filled with repentance- a constant sorrow over sin and trusting in Christ's work, not ours, and when we do, the fruits will grow. Amen.