

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? ⁸Produce 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. ⁹The 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.

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

¹²Tax 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.

¹⁴Then 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.”

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.” ¹⁸And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. (NIV 84)

Theme: Rejoice in the coming Savior

This is a great time of year, isn’t it? Despite the weather usually being colder and gloomier everyone seems to love Christmas time. For many it’s because you get to see relatives that you haven’t seen since last year, going to Christmas programs or concerts, listening to your favorite Christmas songs, or putting out your favorite Christmas

decorations. For some it’s the joy of getting or giving presents. This is a special time of year, a joyful time. The secular world likes to talk about the ambiguous “Christmas spirit” a spirit of joy and happiness and sharing and love.

And the Church gets into it a little bit. This week of the Church year—the third week in Advent, as a special name. Traditionally it’s called, “*Gaudete* Sunday,” which is Latin for Rejoice—so today is “Rejoice Sunday.” It is a time to pause and rejoice as the Christmas season is upon us. Christmas is such a happy occasion that this time of year there is a special greeting that say to others: Merry Christmas. That’s quite a bit different than John the Baptist’s greeting, **You brood of Vipers**. “Woah, John, why are you acting like such a scrooge,” we might be thinking to ourselves, “cheer up a little!”

This really underscores the bit of a disconnect between the way the world and the church look at this time of year. The Church’s Christmas season doesn’t start until the evening of December 24th. We are still in the season of Advent, a time to pause and reflect, a time to remember why God had to come down from heaven and take on flesh in the first place. It was to save us poor miserable sinners who were on the way to hell and incapable of saving ourselves. So this time of year is a season of repentance—or remembering and repenting over the fact that that it was my sins that led Jesus to come down to earth.

The way John greeted the crowd coming out to see him—**you brood of Vipers**, reminds us of the devil who came, in the form of a snake, to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and tempted them to sin. Ever since then we have been held captive to sin. Born as a sinner and could do nothing but sin by nature. We have become children of the devil. There is nothing good that lives in us; we are completely corrupt and defiled and totally inclined toward evil.

We are often selfish—caring first about our own interests ahead of anyone else’s. And then we care about those who are close to us or about those who may make our lives better later on in life. If we see someone who is in need and suffering, we often look the other way, pretend that nothing is wrong and go our separate way. You justify it by saying, “I worked hard for what I have, why should I just give something to someone who doesn’t even have a job?” If you can take advantage of someone, you often do so. You might mock and ridicule

those whom we see as lesser than us—or spread gossip about them to make yourself look better, or take something by force or deception. And judgment is coming. John the Baptist talked about the coming wrath. For on the Last Day the Lord will return to judge the whole world and then destroy the world as we know it. The axe is at the root of the tree, as John continues. The time for this world is about to be cut short. Judgment is coming and so is the destruction of the world. And every tree that doesn't bear good fruit will be cut down and burned in a fire. In other words anyone who doesn't do good works will be condemned to the fires of hell.

And don't think that the fact that you are a member of this congregation is going to save you. Being a Jew wasn't going to save the people of Israel. Just because you are a member here, or just because you were baptized in a Lutheran Church, or confirmed, or been a member your whole life, or attend worship on a regular basis—that alone is not going to save you from judgment. All of that doesn't matter without faith in Christ. Through faith in him alone are you saved from eternal judgment. If you rely on yourself or what you have done, you will be cut down.

All this talk about wrath and destruction and death isn't all that joyful or merry. Gaudete Sunday—I think not! We'll get to that in a bit, but first let's examine John's message of repentance. After all, Advent is a season of repentance. What exactly is repentance? The first part of repentance is contrition—a deep felt sorrow and grief because you have failed to obey the Lord's commands. The word for repentance indicates a change of mind or “a turning around.” What you had done before is no longer okay to you. You realize it is wrong and you have a desire to stop what you are doing and turn instead to God. That is part of contrition—if you are sorry for what you have done that you have changed your mind on what you have done!

2. The second part of repentance is faith—faith that your sins are forgiven. Because of Christ, who took away your sins by taking them upon himself and suffering through the eternal punishment that you deserve, your sins have been forgiven. Because of Christ you know and believe that the Lord will not count your sins against you.

Jesus alone is able to save us. That is why John was so quick to deny that he was the Promised Messiah. He was quick to say, **one more**

powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Jesus is more powerful than John, first of all because he is God. As much as John was loved and as great as a preacher as he was (crowds of people did go out into the wilderness to see him); he knew he wasn't on the same level as Christ. John didn't even consider himself worthy enough to untie his sandals. That was the job reserved for the lowest servant—a disgusting and thankless job. But John didn't have the right to even do that because he isn't God and Jesus is. For this same reason John's baptism can't compare to Jesus'. Not that John's baptism wasn't a legitimate baptism. It was a means of grace and through it the peoples' sins were forgiven. It is also important to note that Jesus' himself never baptized anyone—his disciples did, but not Jesus. So what is John saying? The power behind baptism comes from Christ. He is the one who is really doing the work in baptism. He is the one who gives the Holy Spirit and brings us to faith. So it doesn't matter who baptizes you. It doesn't matter if it was John the Baptist himself, or me, or your pastor when we were young. For we only apply the water, but it is Christ who gives baptism its power and works through that baptism to bring us to faith and save us from wrath. That wrath will come upon the earth. But we don't have to be afraid of the day of judgment. John pictures it as a harvest, **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.** Before the Lord throws the weeds into the fire of hell: he will gather wheat into his barn. You are the wheat—you are his believers. And before his full wrath comes upon the earth and it is completely destroyed, he will gather you up. He will take into his eternal barn of heaven where we will dwell safely with him forever.

Gaudete Sunday? How can we rejoice when there is all this talk about death and destruction, when we are focusing on repentance? We certainly can rejoice because we have been saved by Christ! We can look back at our baptism and know that our sins have been washed away and we stand pure and innocent in the eyes of the Lord. We don't have to be afraid of the coming wrath because we'll be safely living in heaven!

So how do we respond now that we stand forgiven already through the work of Christ? We produce fruit. That is the result of faith—we produce fruit. And since repentance is an act of faith, John urges the

people to **produce fruit in keeping with our repentance**. In Acts 26 we read that Paul urged the people to **prove their repentance by their deeds**. Since Christ has saved us we want to obey his word. We no longer want to sin like we had done in the past; now we strive to live a good and holy life. And so our words and actions are led by God. We show others our faith and our repentance by what we do.

So what fruit should you produce in keeping with your repentance? The fruit you produce can be all sorts of different things—it really depends on the situation. The good works you do will differ, sometimes it's easy to see the fruit and sometimes it's not. For instance if your sin is stealing and you repent of that sin the fruit of repentance would be to stop stealing and to give back anything you stole if at all possible. If your sin is sleeping with someone outside of marriage your fruit of faith would be to stop living in sin by either refraining from such actions or by getting married. If you are repentant about not honoring the gospel by not coming to worship or receiving the sacrament, the fruit of faith is to worship and partake of the Lord's Supper. Those are easy and clear examples; at times the fruit is not so easy to determine and our own and we might seek the advice of others.

But the point is, no man can read the heart of another; but our actions indicate what is in our heart. What we do shows that we are truly repentant. And of course the opposite is true—if you refuse to change your ways, then you show that you aren't really repentant. Our fruit shows what is in our heart; it corresponds to our faith and repentance which stems from faith. We don't produce fruit to be saved, we are saved only by Christ, who has freely forgiven us by the shedding of his blood on the cross; and this leads us to live a pure and holy life according to his Word. Our good works are keeping with our repentance; we prove our repentance by what we do or don't do.

Will we fail in producing good fruit? Sadly, all the time. But leads us to Christ, who came down to heaven to save us. In him we stand forgiven. And so even during this season of repentance we find a great reason to rejoice. Advent isn't all that different than Christmas after all! We rejoice in the coming Savior and in the forgiveness he brings us. And we can be merry and joyful for our Savior is coming! Amen.