

December 8, 2024
Second Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 3:1–14 (Malachi 3:1–7; Philippians 1:2–11)

REPENT AND BEAR FRUIT

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

St. Luke is the only Gospel writer who records anything the birth of John the Baptist. Luke tells us that John was born in the hill country of Judah to Zechariah and Elizabeth who were both of priestly descent. (cf: Luke 1:5–25) They were an elderly childless couple, way beyond their childbearing years. But one day while serving in the temple the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and announced that his prayers had been answered. His wife Elizabeth would bear a son who should be named John, and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. After his birth St. Luke records that John:

“... grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” (Luke 1:80)

Throughout Israel's history, the wilderness serves as a place of spiritual formation and testing in God's presence. It was in the wilderness that God revealed Himself to Moses, (cf: Exodus 3:4–6) gave the Law, and entered into His covenant with Israel. (Exodus 19 – 20) God tested Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. (cf: Numbers 32:13) It is believed that the same wilderness where John grew and became strong in spirit is the same region where the Israelites left their wilderness wanderings and crossed into the Promised Land. (cf: Joshua 3) It's the same wilderness where David and Elijah were tested. (cf: 1 Samuel 23–26; 1 Kings 19; Psalm 63) And in light of God's work in this Judean wilderness, it became the anticipated site of God's future deliverance by the One who was to come. (cf: “John the Baptist,” Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1201)

John's ministry was foretold by the prophets. (cf: Isaiah 40:3–4; Malachi 4:5) The Lord God spoke through His prophet Isaiah, saying:

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” (Isaiah 40:3)

Through His prophet Malachi, God said:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”
(Malachi 3:1)

And then God's prophets went silent. For four hundred years, God's prophets were silent. But in our Gospel text this morning, St. Luke locates the specific place in both Roman and Jewish history when the Word of God came to John in the wilderness. (cf: Luke 3:2) It's a significant event in both the world's history and salvation's history. Sometimes John is called the last of the

Old Testament prophets since his prophetic call places him under the old covenant. But the content of his preaching places him in the new. Luke writes that:

“... [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3)

If you saw John walking down the street today, you'd probably cross to the other side to stay away from him. He was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. His diet was Levitically clean, eating locusts and wild honey. (cf: Mark 1:6) And it's true, the artist depiction of John on our bulletin cover this morning is a little disturbing and perhaps a bit frightening, but that is so you don't forget his message. His message was:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

His message is clear. The Judge of all eternity is coming, and you are guilty. You need a Savior.

When John came, he understood his mission and he knew his limitations. He was only the messenger. He was only preparing the way for the coming King. The baptism he gave wasn't the same as you received at this font. John's baptism was repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was recognition of Law and Gospel. Recognition of the Law is knowing what God wants you to do and not to do. Recognition of the Gospel is knowing what God has done for you and continues to do for you through your Savior, Jesus. John's Baptism was a call to turn away from solely trusting in one's self or family heritage. To us, it's a call to turn away from trusting that just because we sit in the church pew, we're saved. It's a call to faith in the Coming One who would bleed and die for the forgiveness of your sins.

If John the Baptist were a doctor, you could say he didn't have a bed-side manner. There're a lot a polite and welcoming ways to greet people. *“Welcome to the wilderness.”* *“How are you today?”* *“It's great to see you all.”* *“Thank you for coming.”* But John cuts right to the heart of the matter. He calls the crowds that came to be baptized a **“brood of vipers,”** meaning, the offspring of poisonous serpents. (cf: Luke 3:7)

In his Gospel account, St. Matthew says that John was speaking directly to the Pharisees and Sadducees, (cf: Matthew 3:7–10) but here in our text, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke says that John was also rebuking the crowds. So this this morning, John is speaking to you and me as well. Apart from repentance and new life in Christ, you and I are nothing more than a **“brood of vipers.”** We are offspring of that ancient poisonous serpent, the devil, slithering about in the wilderness of sin and eternal death.

John was the messenger sent by God to prepare the people for the coming Christ Jesus by calling on them to repent of their sins, and through repentance, receive the forgiveness of sins in Christ. And calling you to repentance is just what John is doing when he calls you and me a **“brood of vipers.”**

You could say that John calling the crowds and you and me a **“brood of vipers”** is harsh. But John's point is not speaking hyperbole. He's not exaggerating for effect. No. Prior to faith and Baptism into Christ Jesus, you were a sinful child of the devil. And today, as a baptized child of Christ, the sin which still pulses through your sinful heart and veins is poisonous and deadly.

Because of your sinfulness, you and I deserve no more mercy from God than you would show a venomous viper slithering on the ground.

The true repentance to which John the Baptist calls us is a repentance which looks on our own sin as horrifying, repulsive, and deadly. It's a repentance which confesses: *"I am a poor miserable sinner."* Repentance does not look on its sin with indifference or amusement, and certainly not with pride, as if to glory in your shame. A repentant heart look upon its sin with dread and acknowledge that it is indeed a member of a **"brood of vipers."**

Our Lord Jesus Christ is coming soon, and you and I have a lot of work to do. Your life is a wilderness... a wilderness of either trials and tribulations sent by the devil, or a wilderness of testing by God for your spiritual formation so that you cling to Christ and Him crucified for you for the forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation. You try to prepare the way for your Savior... try to straighten out your crooked ways, fill in your valleys, and sand off your rough edges. But regardless of what you do, there's nothing you can do on your own to make yourself acceptable before the Lord. You and I are helpless – but not hopeless.

Our Old Testament lesson says that God's messenger:

"... is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." (Malachi 3:2)

Jesus is both the refiner and the fire. The refiner fires the material so impurities can be removed from the precious metal. Jesus casts out all impurities from His Kingdom – but – He allows the fire of trials and tribulations to come to the faithful to refine you, to purify you, to help you to cling to Him. His cleansing fire purifies, sanctifies, and makes you holy.

So too it is with the fuller's soap. The Fuller was the man who would process wool. He had a strong soap made of lye to clean the wool and make it white so that it could be made into clothing. No one wants to buy dirty wool.

You and I are like dirty wool. Our flesh is permanently stained and discolored because of sin. But Jesus is the Fuller and the soap. He takes the dirty and stained flesh of the faithful and makes them clean. His soap is His precious blood which He shed on the cross. With His blood He cleanses you from your sorrows, your guilt, and your shame.

John baptized with water for repentance, Christ came to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. (cf: Matthew 3:11) At the font, Jesus the Fuller took His precious soap and:

"... you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11)

In the washing of the water and the Word (cf: Ephesians 5:26) you were given the gift of faith, forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit. (cf: Acts 2:38) You were marked as one redeemed by Christ the Crucified and you received the hope of eternal life because of the washing of regeneration. (cf: Titus 3:5-8)

Our Lord Jesus Christ is coming soon, and just like the crowds in our text, we ask:

"What then shall we do?" (Luke 3:10)

The answer to that is – live your life as a baptized believer in Christ. Rejoice and prepare the way of the Lord. Repent for the kingdom of God is near. Repent and live out your new life in Christ.

Bear fruits in keeping with repentance, (cf: Luke 3:8) which means, live as a new creation in Christ, serve and love others just as God in Christ serves and loves you. Just as John says in our text, share your food and clothing with those in need. Do your vocation honestly. If you are a tax collector, don't collect more than the authorized tax. If you are a soldier, don't use your power to extort, but be content with your wages. Tend to your vocation and your responsibilities. Share with those in need. And don't think for a moment that you've done enough or that there isn't more to do. God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor desperately does – and God prepared them beforehand, that you should walk in them. (cf: Ephesians 2:10)

The voice of one crying in the wilderness has a message that is still immediate and imperative today. ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** Repentance is more than simply feeling sorrow and remorse. True repentance is seeking a godly alternative to sinful living. You know that on the last day, God's judgment will be swift against the unrepentant and they'll be thrown into the fire. Because of old Adam's sinful nature, no one will stand, and no one will endure on Judgment Day. At least not on your own. But you, brothers and sisters in Christ, have an advocate with the Father. (cf: 1 John 2:1) You and all who trust in Christ have been purified by the fire of the Refiner – that is the trials and tribulations of the wilderness of this life. You have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God and have been declared not guilty of your sin. Through faith, God has begun a good work in you and:

“...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.