

Sermon Notes for 12/13/15 (Advent 3)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Luke 3:7-18
Theme: WHEN GOD SHOWS UP, GOOD FRUITS PREVAIL

The Point: Because of the certainty of God’s judgment, we live with repentant hearts as our Lord directs us to bear worthy fruits.

Introduction: So what happens when God shows up? That is a worthwhile question for us to consider. If God is not around, anything that happens will be purely a human undertaking – or worse, totally devilish. And that sort of thing ends up badly. But the presence of God brings about confrontation and it brings about change, change to a fruitful and productive life for God’s people. John the Baptizer dealt with that question in his interactions with various people in today’s Gospel reading.

God’s presence brings confrontation, since it means judgment for all who oppose His will. John spoke in warning words to those who came to be baptized purely as a show. He called them a “brood of vipers.” They were boasting about being Abraham’s descendants, as if that were some sort of spiritual advantage to them. When it comes to being saved, we cannot appeal to our cultural or religious heritage. Imagine your preacher calling you a bunch of poisonous snakes! That would probably not go over well, would it? But John knew that many of those in his audience were not there with repentant and humble hearts, but only to prove that they were on the cutting edge of spirituality or to check out the preacher or some such random motivation. His warning to that group is ominous: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The lack of God’s presence in their lives was evident through their lack of good fruit. Those lives where a lack of fruit demonstrated their lack of connection to the Lord would be subject to judgment, cut down by God’s ax. During this Advent season, we are brought face to face with the proclamation of the Scripture and the Church through all ages: Christ is coming again. His second coming will not be in the same spirit as the first coming. He came the first time in humility and weakness and emptiness. He comes again wearing the crown as King of the Universe and carrying the scepter of judgment as Judge of all.

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” This is a hard saying, an example of the Law of God cutting deeply into the hearts of people. And the crowds were struck by John’s words, for they immediately ask, “What then should we be doing?” That question comes from a repentant heart, eager to avoid this harsh judgment, but unsure just what that might mean for them on a daily basis. This questioner wants to know just how this action of being baptized would affect daily life. What kinds of fruit would be expected of a follower of this Messiah, Jesus?

John spells out just what repentance will look like in their post-baptism lives: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Open-handedness, a willingness to share and to give, such responses show that one desires to emulate the giving heart and spirit of the Lord, who is the great and original Giver. Such an other-centered life demonstrates an accurate reflection of the Creator who brought us into being as His image.

Tax collectors coming for baptism ask the same question, and John tells them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” They were not to use their authority simply to line their own pockets at the expense of the poor and needy, but they were to act with integrity and honesty. Interestingly, John does not tell them to leave their jobs and to find vocations less tied to the Roman invaders. He encourages them to find redemptive strains in the midst of serving in their civil service occupation.

To soldiers who came with the same question, John replied, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” He knew how those who wield power might abuse that power, and he warns the soldiers that their lives were no longer to run along those power principles. Soldiers were probably themselves members of the Roman army and thus representatives of the invading power that had occupied Israel. Again, John does not demand that these soldiers renounce their loyalty to the empire. But he calls on them to use their position to bless others rather than to extort from them.

All three groups receive a response from John that cuts right to the pocketbook, and right to the heart of injustice and abuse of power. He tells them quite plainly that the life of a repentant, baptized child of God will have ramifications. This is an encounter with a living God, a God who is “with us”, Immanuel. No encounter with this God will be inconsequential. This baptism is not just a quick bath, then back to the old ways of life. No quick look in the mirror, then going away and forgetting just what was visible there. Not just seeing to it that our child is baptized, then ignoring that reality in our family’s daily planning and activity. This baptism, as the act of a present, living and involved God, marks the beginning of a whole new way of living – for them in the first century and for you and me today.

John’s preaching is so powerful that many imagine that he might be the promised Messiah. If John had desired to do so, he could have written his own ticket. But he refused. In another place, he put it this way: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John refused to blow his own horn or to play his own tune. All the way through, he was driven by the fact that the Messiah was following him, indeed right on his heels. And to that One the crowds will be directed. John’s word was powerful, and his baptism connected them with the Lord, but the Messiah IS the Lord. He is the One upon whom all power rests. He is the One who offers and grants the Holy Spirit Himself as gift and source of life. John can use the power of baptism, but Jesus gives the power to baptism!

We hear strains of this already in Zechariah’s prophecy read from earlier: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst [not off there in the heavens somewhere watching you from a distance, but right in the middle of the action], a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. [You see, the presence of God brings victory, joy, songs and blessing.] I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.” Our God, the God who calls us to repentance and who assures us by means of His rich promises that we are forgiven, this God has designs on us and on this entire earth. He will not be content just to sprinkle a few pixie dust promises in some remote corner of the globe and then take off. He sends His Word out, even to the lame and the outcast, in order to cancel out their shame, to turn it into praise, praise of His goodness and mercy.

When Paul talks about the nearness of the Lord’s coming, he reminds us that we are to approach these days with prayer and thanksgiving. “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” No worry is to mark the attitudes of God’s people – because Christ is coming, and as a result the future is entirely in His hands.

When Jesus returns, His coming will be heralded by some as the end of it all. But we who know Him as our Savior and our Lord will rejoice in that day. John predicted it this way, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The chaff, all that has resisted His will to form it into productive grain, all those who have held Jesus away at arm’s length, content merely to be acquainted with Him at some shallow level – all the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. John and Jesus both had a lot to say about the final judgment of fire that will not be extinguished. Judgment will be frightful for all who have rejected God’s final truth for their lives.

But the wheat Christ will gather into His granary. A *Leadership* magazine some years ago had an article written by a missionary who had served in West Africa. He had wondered what it meant to sow in tears and to reap in joy until he went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna 4000 miles wide just under the Sahara Desert. All the moisture comes during May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop for 8 months! In October and November the granaries are full. People sing and dance and eat two meals a day, making a mush the consistency of yesterday's "Cream of Wheat" and eating plenty. In December granaries get more empty; many families omit the morning meal. By January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals daily. By February, the evening meal diminishes and shrinks even more during March, when many children succumb to sickness. Half a meal a day doesn't keep many babies healthy.

His story continues: "April is the month that haunts my memory. In it you hear the babies crying in the twilight. Most of the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel. Then, inevitably, it happens. A six-or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. 'Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!' he shouts. 'Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks.' 'Yes, we have!' the boy insists. 'Out in the hut where we keep the goats -- there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall -- I reached up and put my hand down in there -- Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!'

"The father stands motionless. 'Son, we can't do that,' he softly explains. 'That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it.' The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest."

You and I believe in the harvest. Our Lord desires and promises a rich and productive harvest. But in the meantime, we may have to sow in tears. When other people prove fickle and disappoint us by failing to keep their commitments, we sow patience and forgiveness with tears. When our own hearts weaken and give in to those same old temptations, we sow in tears as we return to Christ in bitter repentance and sorrow. When we go through heart-rending experiences of loss and grief, we sow in tears while we point others to the sure promises of our Lord. When the daily challenges seem too much for us to absorb, we sow in tears of faithfulness and perseverance. And our Lord, who is always present with us and for us, promises to save our tears in His bottle.

Conclusion: Because of the certainty of God's judgment, we live with repentant hearts as our Lord chooses us and directs us to bear worthy fruits. When God shows up, good fruits prevail. And because we know the grace of God at work in forgiving us and renewing us, we can do as today's readings suggest. "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you!" Or, as Paul puts it, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Today, this third Sunday in Advent, is known as Gaudete Sunday. "Gaudete" is a Latin word meaning "Y'all rejoice!" We sing and praise our Lord here in our worship because our lives also are to be reflections of our daily lives of worship and praise as we live to His honor and glory, producing fruits worthy of our repentance. May that be our joy and our delight this day and into all eternity as we wait for our Lord's sudden return. In Jesus' precious name, AMEN!

Paul's words from Philippians are words that I leave you with each and every week. They are words that he wrote from the squalor of his prison cell, just as the rest of this "Epistle of Joy" as we call it: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."