

Sermon on Luke 3:7-18  
Pastor David Wietzke  
2nd Sunday in Advent (C)  
December 9, 2018



*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? 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. The axe 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."*

*"What should we do then?" the crowd asked.*

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

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

*"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.*

*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."*

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

We know from the Scriptures that Jesus has told us “no one knows the day or the hour”, that the day of this world’s end and the glorious appearing of Jesus is one of those truths that the Bible has not revealed to us (although it assures us that his coming is very much a reality that will come soon enough!)

But maybe you can imagine with me for just a moment that things were a bit different. Just pretend for a second that God had given us a special revelation about judgment day, maybe an angel who revealed that the end of this age would definitely take place sometime within the next 4 to 6 months. Just imagine knowing that to be an undeniable fact. Then ask yourself, how would your life during that time change from what it is now?

You probably wouldn’t spend much time worrying about the state of your retirement plan, would you? Nor a lot of other things, for that matter. No, your attention would be fixed on asking yourself, am I ready? Am I prepared for that day? Am I paying attention to the things my Savior would be having me pay attention to? Am I living a life that is pleasing to him and glorifies him? And then along with those questions, how can I also help others to be ready? Especially those that are close to me?

Now of course, we don't know for a fact that the Lord will come in less than six months (although he certainly could!) But ask yourself: is your situation—or *should* it be—really so greatly different from what it would be if you did know that to be true? And what does that mean for your life?

I think that's a helpful mental exercise to think about as we hear today's Gospel reading. For when John the Baptist came preaching to the people long ago, he came with a message of incredible urgency. He told people, ***“The ax is already at the root of the trees!...His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor...He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire!”*** His message is clear: there can be no waiting around, no taking it for granted that there's no coming of the Lord in power to be concerned about. **The time to be prepared is NOW! 1) With genuine repentance, and 2) With joyful anticipation.**

### **I. Now is the time to become prepared: with genuine repentance**

John saw more and more people coming out to be baptized by him in the desert. Since that would seem to be a wonderful thing, we may be startled to see how harshly John speaks to those who were coming to him. ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”*** he accused them. The other Gospels tell us that at least some of those who were coming out at this time were Pharisees. That helps us understand why John spoke the way he did. Too many of the Pharisees thought of themselves as better than others and with no need to repent of their sins. If they were coming to be baptized it was only for show; they didn't really feel that they needed any spiritual gift.

So John told them that repentance had to be genuine. ***“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!”*** “Talk is cheap!” John was saying. If you are really repentant, then show it with a changed life!

The people who heard John say this asked him, “What then should we do?” What things should we change about our lives? And John was ready with specific answers for them! Whether they were soldiers, tax collectors, or any other occupation, John had a message for them: stay away from the sins that are common to your profession, and live a godly life. Share with others who are in need. Be content with what you have rather than trying to use your position to take advantage of other people. John didn't command the people to quit their jobs and go live as religious hermits in the desert, or anything like that. He told them to live their lives in society, but to live them in a new way that showed that they believed that God would come soon to judge the world!

So what would John say to you, if you came to him in the desert and asked him, “And what should I do?” I'm guessing that John would not be at a loss for words! Maybe he would say to us, “Stop telling yourselves, ‘I'm a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran’! Don't you know that God can make WELS Lutherans out of these stones?” Or maybe his message to you would sound something like this: ***“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!”*** Don't just say, “Yeah, I know I probably shouldn't keep on living like this or talking like this”—actually stop doing it! Don't just say, “I really ought to do a better job at this”—whatever task God has set before

you—actually go out and do it! Don't let your repentance be a mere going through the motions; don't let your confession of sins on Sundays become just a mouthing of words you don't really mean. And don't think that there will be a better time for repentance than today. Now is the time to prepare for the Lord's coming!

## **II. Now is the time to prepare: with joyful anticipation**

With so many commands and warnings coming from John's mouth, it might surprise us that Luke sums up his message by saying that John preached the "good news" to the people. What's so "good" about telling people, "Change your ways or else!" That's not the good news, that's the command of the law of God. But John didn't only forcefully preach God's law, he also proclaimed the Savior.

On this occasion, he said: ***"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."*** John's preaching had been so powerful that some people had started to wonder if he himself might be the Messiah! John quickly set the record straight and told them—the one coming right behind me will do far more for you than I could ever do! He is the one who deserves your attention!

What is it that leads people to true repentance? What message can truly change a person's heart and life? Threats of punishment alone can't do that. Only the promise of a Savior has that power. He came with power from God, and at his first coming he did not use that power to destroy sinners but rather to do things like heal the sick, driving out Satan's minions. He suffered brutal tortures, died upon a cross and rose from the dead. And now he pours out a powerful baptism on his people, the fire of the Holy Spirit in hearts that gives us true zeal for God. We aren't worthy to untie his shoelaces, but he came to help us and save us!

That's the message that empowers people to live new and transformed lives—the message that salvation and eternal life in heaven has come. "He will gather his wheat into his barn," John said, reminding us that Jesus will rescue his own out of the fire of judgment and gather them to himself. What an invitation, to become a part of the people of God who will live with him in eternity!

So we have a lot of joyful anticipation as we live our lives. With the fear of death itself taken away, and the fear that God will abandon us in earthly life also taken away, we can be bold in our Christian faith. We can be eager to show the world what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We can rededicate ourselves to live the life of repentance that John the Baptist preached so forcefully.

The book of James puts it bluntly: *"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."* (James 2:18) John the Baptist would heartily agree with that verse. Let

your faith be visible in actions! Help others who are in need. Share. Give. Volunteer. Be content. Speak constructively to and about others. The list could go on and on.

But we do these things not in fear but in joyful anticipation—joy because of the salvation Jesus won for us in his first coming and anticipation because of what he will bring when he comes again.

### **Conclusion**

A couple of times in the last few months I've been asked if I think that we are really living in the last days before Judgment Day. We can certainly see why God waits. Every single Sunday around the world people are hearing the good news, being baptized and brought to faith. While it may not seem this way to us, a researcher from the University of California recently declared that Protestant Christianity is one of the two most dynamic and growing religions in the world. (the other, unfortunately, is "resurgent Islam")<sup>1</sup>

So could God wait awhile so that more people can come to faith? He certainly could. One the other hand, it's been almost 2000 years since John declared that God's ax was already at the root of the tree. The signs of the end have been fully fulfilled. We have been warned to be ready--to flee from the coming wrath!

And so that's what we do. We flee to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and eternal life. So heed John's call to repent. Live your life each day as one who is aware that he is coming soon, one who has been made ready! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion in Global Civil Society*, Oxford University Press (2005). Quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism\\_by\\_country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism_by_country), retrieved 12/4/2018.