

PREPARE

Luke 3:1-20

Second Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 5, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 20. In this gospel lesson, we hear from the messenger, John the Baptizer, who came to prepare the way before Jesus. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

⁷He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork

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is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Jesus comes in righteousness. This means different things for different people. Chaff will be burned. Wheat will be gathered. Jesus does not want you to be unprepared, so he sends his messenger to prepare the way before him. Before his first coming, he sent John the Baptizer to prepare the way. And the message John proclaimed nearly two thousand years ago is still God’s Word to you today: Repent.

It’s impossible to overstate the seriousness of this message. Really, every preacher’s great challenge is communicating this with the same seriousness and urgency as John the Baptizer did. Sometimes we’re timid, or even cowardly. Or we just want you to be okay, so we tell you everything is okay. But what if everything is not okay? What if you are not okay? And by “not okay,” I mean lost without even knowing it. Not all who are lost know they are lost. There were certainly those during the ministry of John, and this carried over into Jesus’ ministry, who thought they were just fine. So they ignored John’s preaching of repentance, and they rejected Jesus.

The truth is, none of us are okay. So God brings the answer near to us. He splashes it on our heads, he preaches it in our ears, and he places it in our mouths. But as long as we think that we’re just fine, we will reject it, and we will continue to not be okay.

John was a preacher. Of course, he also baptized. That’s why we call him “the Baptist,” or “the Baptizer” in order to avoid any denominational confusion. But he seems to have spent most of his time preaching. His preaching and baptizing were obviously connected. Luke says, “He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). This is a helpful proof text for the biblical teaching that Baptism forgives sins. Mark also has an almost identical verse in his gospel (1:4). John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Now think about that. What does that mean? Many of our protestant friends consider Baptism to be nothing more than a symbol. They consider it to be an act of obedience that demonstrates our commitment to Christ. They say it is “an outward sign of an inward change.” But that is clearly not John’s view of Baptism. John connected Baptism with repentance, not in the sense that Baptism symbolized repentance, but that it actually works repentance. Instead of being a sign of change, it is the change. It was a Baptism *of* repentance. And what was the result of John’s Baptism? The forgiveness of sins. It was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Now if John’s Baptism did all this, should we then consider Jesus’ Baptism to be something less? A mere symbol? Certainly not! Jesus’ Baptism does all of this and more. It also gives us the Holy Spirit (3:16). So we should find great comfort in our Baptisms.

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John preached and baptized in order to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke quotes Isaiah to identify John as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (3:4-6; Is. 40:3-5). And in the Old Testament lesson from Malachi, the LORD promised to send a messenger to prepare the way before him (Mal. 3:1). That’s John. John prepared the way for Jesus by preaching and baptizing.

And John’s entire ministry can be summarized in one word: “repentance.” He preached repentance, and he baptized for repentance. This is how he prepared people for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we should talk about this word: repentance. What is it? How do we repent? How do we know that we have repented? How do we know our repentance is really enough?

Our Lutheran confessions have a biblical, clear, and very helpful definition of repentance. It goes like this:

Now, strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance. (*Augsburg Confession*, XII:3-6)

Repentance consists of two parts: contrition and faith.

The main reason we define repentance this way is in order to leave something out. When we define repentance as contrition and faith, what’s missing? What are we leaving out of that formula? We are intentionally leaving good works out of it. At the time of the Reformation, the Lutherans were arguing with the Roman Catholic Church concerning this doctrine. The Roman Church taught, and still teaches, that part of repentance is works of satisfaction. That is, it’s not enough to confess your sins; it’s not enough to believe that Jesus paid for your sin; you have to do something in order to earn forgiveness. So they include works of satisfaction in their formula of repentance. They teach that without some kind of works, your sins cannot be forgiven.

But this is not just something the Roman Church teaches. This is really the way human beings think. In fact, the natural human idea of repentance is much worse. The natural human idea of repentance is that works of satisfaction are the only part of repentance. Unless we are corrected from God’s Word, we will all think this way. This is the way we usually think on a practical level, even Lutherans who should know better.

When you mess up, and by “mess up,” I mean “sin,” what do you do? What do you think? I hope you confess your sin and praise God that he has given his only Son into death in order to forgive you. But I bet you don’t do that all the time. And I say that because I don’t do that all the time. We have a different natural response. Or there are probably a few natural responses. One natural response is to cover it up. If we can hide it, we do. But if we get caught, and if we can’t talk our way out of it, our natural response is to make up for it. We especially do this with God. We try to pay him back. We try to do better. This is how we naturally think. So the natural definition of repentance really only consists of one part: doing better. When you blow it, and I mean really blow it, and you say to yourself, “I need to repent,” what does that mean? Unfortunately, we probably think that means that we need to do better. We think of repentance as turning from sin to good works. And it might be true that we do need to do better, but that’s not what repentance is.

Christian repentance can be defined as a turning. The Old Testament word for “repent” (*shūv*; שׁוּב) means “to turn.” But what kind of turning is it? What are we turning from, and what are we turning to? It is not turning from sin to good works. Instead, it is turning from sin and

unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. That's Christian repentance. And if that's what repentance is, then it cannot be turning from sin to good works. Now, why do I say that? If we turn from sin to good works, that's not really faith. In fact, it's just another form of unbelief, which is still sin. If we think repentance means turning from sin to good works, then who are we really trusting? We're trusting ourselves. We're believing that we are capable of atoning for whatever it is we did this time. We underestimate the seriousness of our sin, and we overestimate our ability to make things right with God. So it's just a pious looking form of unbelief. We are not trusting Christ, but ourselves, and this is still unbelief. That's why I say that turning from sin to good works is not Christian repentance. Repentance consists of two parts: contrition and faith. And we intentionally leave our good works out of repentance.

The objection to this definition is pretty obvious. Someone will say: "Well, then you just don't care about good works. If you teach this, people are just going to do whatever they want. They're going to steal and murder and rape and lie and disobey authorities and do every evil thing!"

But this is a false accusation. We do care about good works. And we care about them enough to put them in their proper place. We say, "Good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance." You might notice, this sounds a lot like how John the Baptizer treated good works. First he proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Then he preached, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (3:8). For John, good works, also called "fruits," were not part of repentance, but they followed repentance. They do not start your repentance. They do not complete your repentance. They do not prove your repentance. But they follow repentance as the natural and necessary fruit of repentance. This is the true biblical teaching. So this is also genuine teaching of the Lutheran Church.

Regrettably, there have been, and still are, so-called Lutherans who have little or no concern that Christians should live according to God's commandments. Avoid them. This has never been the true teaching of the Lutheran Church. All you have to do is read the Small Catechism. It starts with the Ten Commandments, and it continues to speak of good works throughout the rest of the little book. Then you can read the Large Catechism, or Luther's sermons, or the sermons of any of the great Lutheran preachers from previous centuries. Wherever the Lutheran confessions have been faithfully believed and taught, good works have been taught as the fruits of repentance. We're following what John preached. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance."

There is a complacent, unloving, and faithless attitude that we are tempted to. We are tempted to find something else to lean on, something other than Jesus Christ. This is the attitude that thinks, *I'm okay; I don't need to worry about anything*. So we turn away from repentance, and we reject the good works that follow repentance. In John's day, the Jews were tempted to rely on their ancestry. So John said, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' " (3:8). They leaned on the fact that they were descendants of Abraham. Being a descendant of Abraham was, of course, a good thing. God made promises to Abraham and to his offspring. But to lean on this in such a way that they reject repentance and neglect the works that follow repentance, is really to despise God's covenant with Abraham, because God had set Abraham and his descendants apart to belong to himself.

And there are probably a number of things we might lean on in order to avoid repentance and the good works that follow. And they even might be good things, like Baptism. We've spoken already about the great benefits of Baptism, but we might also be tempted to lean on our

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Baptisms apart from repentance. Just as the Jews might say, “I’m a child of Abraham, so I’m okay,” we might say, “I’m baptized, so I’m okay.” This idea is certainly alive and active today. If you think Baptism means that you have no ongoing need for repentance, or if you have no concern for the good works that follow repentance, you’re really despising your Baptism. Because Baptism works repentance. It works contrition and faith. And repentance is not just a one-time thing. It’s a life-long thing. We constantly live in contrition and faith. Baptism is the beginning of a life of repentance. And the fruits of this repentance are good works. To reject this is really to despise your Baptism. “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”

Now you might be wondering, “What then shall we do?” I’m glad you asked. The crowds asked John this same question. So let’s see what he said.

To all of them he said, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise” (3:11). Applying this to our lives today is pretty straightforward. Do you have the financial means to share with the poor? Then do it. And I especially want you to notice that this is a command. This is not optional. You might be in poverty, in which case you should be receiving. But if you are not in poverty, and if you have the ability to give, then you must do so. This is the command of God. And do not think that your taxes cover this. God does not command the government to pay welfare. He commands his people to care for the poor. So pay your taxes, and give to the poor. This probably means finding a charity, especially a local charity, that cares for the poor in our community. It may also mean giving money to beggars; although, it’s difficult to know the best way to help someone we don’t know. But God’s command certainly means that we help those whom we do know, like our family, friends, neighbors, and fellow church members. And this will probably mean a heavier burden. When you give to a charity, you can set up a monthly gift you’re comfortable with. When you give to a beggar, you can give a couple bucks and feel good about yourself, without making any real sacrifice. But when your neighbor or relative or friend or fellow church member is in need, that might be a bigger commitment, and it might be an inconvenient time. But you might be the person God has appointed to meet their need. Then we need to change our thinking. We should not consider our possessions to be our own. God has entrusted us with whatever we have. This gives us the freedom to take our greed out of the equation and simply consider how something can best be used. Often times, it can be used better by someone else. And in those cases, we should give it away. This is the fruit of repentance.

Then there were two specific groups that asked John what they should do: tax collectors and soldiers. I suspect some of the Jews were hoping John would say, “Quit your job.” But he didn’t. Instead, he instructed them to fulfill their vocations honestly. To the tax collectors, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do” (3:13). And to the soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone . . . , and be content with your wages” (3:14). We learn from this that these are legitimate vocations. Taxes should be collected. And the world needs soldiers. I should also note that in the ancient world, soldiers also filled the role of police officers, so we can include them in this. The world needs soldiers and police officers because it is filled with sin. Force is needed to preserve justice and order. Otherwise, someone will use force to do evil. God commands soldiers and police officers to fulfill their vocations fairly. And since this world is filled with sin, it also means that soldiers and police officers are also sinful. They will not be perfect, but their service is still necessary, and God commands them to act fairly.

Every vocation has certain responsibilities. These are the good works God has ordained for people to do in those vocations. And these also lead to particular temptations.

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We can also imagine parents going to John and asking, “What shall we do?” Do not neglect your children, but feed them, teach them, protect them, take them to church, and pray for them.

Children might ask, “What shall we do?” Honor your father and mother.

Students might ask, “What shall we do?” Do not presume to know it all, but seek the wisdom of your teachers.

Salespeople might ask, “What shall we do?” Do not cheat your customers, but help them find what is best for them.

Workers might ask, “What shall we do?” Put your phone back in your pocket, and obey your employer.

Farmers might ask, “What shall we do?” Do not quarrel with your neighbor, and be fair to your workers.

Retirees might ask, “What shall we do?” Lots of things, because you have time. Assist your children or grandchildren. Visit the sick or the hurting. Help your neighbor. And if you are physically unable to do any of these things, do the greatest work God has given to us all, and pray for others.

In whatever station of life God has placed you, be faithful, honest, and generous. “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”

These good works are not your repentance. They earn you nothing before God. If you look to your works as your repentance, and then you ask, “Is it enough?” The answer is a definite “no.” Repentance, rather, is that you look to Jesus Christ in faith. Because he is enough. His sacrifice is sufficient for your sin. John’s great work was to point sinners to Jesus Christ. And so repentance consists of two parts, and only two parts: contrition and faith. The works that follow are the fruit of repentance.

Jesus comes in righteousness. Chaff will be burned. Wheat will be gathered. Jesus wants you to be prepared. So his word to you is “repent.” Confess your sin. Trust in Jesus’ sacrifice on your behalf. None of us are okay. So God brings the answer near to us. He splashes it on our heads, he preaches it in our ears, and he places it in our mouths. Trust the gift of Jesus, and bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)