

BAPTISM, REPENTANCE, AND FORGIVENESS

Luke 3:1-20

Second Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 8, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 20. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ In 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As 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.’ ”

⁷ He 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? ⁸ Bear 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. ⁹ Even 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.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers 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.”

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John 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. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork 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 reprov'd 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.

Dear brood of vipers,

Flee from the wrath to come. Repent of your sins. And look to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Today we listen to John the Baptizer. And he is a good man to listen to. Jesus later said concerning him, **“Among those born of women none is greater than John”** (7:28). So we might conclude from Jesus' words that John is the second greatest man ever, second only to Jesus himself.

And John was a preacher. We commonly call him “John the Baptizer,” because he baptized people. But he did more than baptize. He was, first and foremost, a preacher. He was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (3:4). He was the messenger we read about in Malachi, when the LORD Yahweh said, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me” (Mal. 3:1). So John was a preacher and a baptizer. When you think about it, he was fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) before Jesus even gave it. He was baptizing and teaching. And, through this ministry, he was making disciples of Jesus. Jesus had not yet been revealed as the Christ, but John was making disciples who believed in the Christ and would soon recognize Jesus as him. So we should listen to John. He has the right credentials.

Before we get to John's preaching, we should notice the historical context. Luke tells us who the Caesar was, who was governing where, and who the high priests were. And the Bible often does this, even back in Genesis. It reports names, dates, and specific places. That's because these things were not done in a corner (Acts 26:26). They are history. Sometimes skeptics dismiss the Scriptures as legends or fairy tales, because they contain accounts of miracles. They equate the Christian Scriptures with the writings of other religions, which lack this level of specificity. But the Christian Scriptures are different. Even if someone doesn't believe the Scriptures, you have to admit that they were meant to be read as history. There are different genres in the Bible. Revelation is obviously apocalyptic. The Psalms are obviously poetry. But many of the books, like Luke, Acts, Genesis, Joshua, and others, are meant to be read as history. And it doesn't take advanced training to figure it out. You can pick up the book, read it, and easily see that the author intends for you to understand it as history. That's why Luke and others include details that we really don't care about now. No one cares that Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. But Luke put it there because it was true. Here in the Bible we have a book that is filled with the supernatural, but which also presents itself as history. Whatever we do with it, we cannot pretend that it's just legends that are not meant to be taken seriously.

The people Luke mentions were all real. And it's not just trivia. Luke lays out the map of influential people in order to contrast them with John. John was the son of a priest, Zechariah, but nothing like the high priest. And he didn't live in Jerusalem or a palace somewhere. He was as far as you could get from the halls of power. But the Word of God came to him in the

wilderness (3:2). And this Word of God heralded the arrival of the Christ, the King of Heaven and Earth. We might expect such a royal decree to be proclaimed to the rulers of the world. But no. It did not come to the Caesar. It did not come to Pilate, who ruled in Jerusalem, or King Herod, or his brother Philip. And even though Jesus was the Christ of Israel, the message did not come to Annas or Caiaphas. It came to John, a wild man in the wilderness. It showed that the Kingdom of God was not coming like the kingdoms of this world. It would not consist of the rich and powerful. But it was coming to a dessert wilderness. Among the weak and dry hearts, the Kingdom would come and bear fruit. This whole world, despite our efforts to civilize it, is pure wilderness. We might have homes to keep us warm from the blistering cold, but death still comes for us all. People destroy people. It's still a place of wild chaos. So the Word of God comes to John in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, because the Lord Jesus comes to this entire wilderness of chaos that we call earth.

John's calling was to proclaim that the Christ is coming. Therefore, all people should receive the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins (3:3). Verse three is significant for the biblical teaching of Baptism. John proclaimed "a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Baptism is not a mere symbol of our obedience that follows repentance. Baptism is inseparable from repentance. People were confessing their sins while they were being baptized (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5). Repentance and Baptism are inseparable, because we can't change our own hearts. There has to be a real, substantial work of God. Baptism works that change. So John did not preach about Baptism and repentance as two different things, but he preached a Baptism *of* repentance. People confessed their sins, John baptized them, he told them to look to the Christ who was about to be revealed, and the Holy Spirit worked a change in their hearts, so that they could recognize Jesus as that Christ. Later in the Gospel of Luke, there's a contrast between the common people on one hand and the Pharisees on the other. The people believed Jesus, because they had been baptized by John, but the Pharisees disbelieved, because they had not (7:29-30). The proof is in the pudding. John's Baptism had worked a real change in their hearts. It gave them faith in Jesus before they even knew who Jesus is.

Verse three also explicitly states that Baptism forgives sins. It's "a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*." So Baptism works repentance. That is, it creates faith; it changes hearts. And it forgives sins. And this was all from John's Baptism, before Jesus started baptizing, and before Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptize. If John's Baptism did all this, would we expect Jesus' Baptism to do less? Of course not. And they're not really two different Baptisms. They are both Baptisms into Jesus Christ, and that is how they save. The only difference between them is that Jesus' Baptism also gives the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet been given when John was baptizing. So we should take great comfort in the marvelous gifts that Baptism bestows.

But we should not take Baptism for granted. Someone might say, "I don't need to repent, because I was baptized." That's completely backward. Because you are baptized, you should live in constant repentance. That is, we should continue to confess our sins and look to Christ for forgiveness. In this way, we daily return to our Baptisms. The Augsburg Confession gives us a beautifully simple definition of repentance:

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).

The Holy Spirit works these two attitudes in our hearts: contrition, so that we confess our sins, and faith, so that we have confidence that our sins are forgiven for Jesus sake. We need this constant repentance, because we are by nature sinful and unclean. If we resist this call to repentance, we're really despising our Baptisms and all the gifts God promised there. If we say, "I don't need to repent, because I was baptized," we would be just like the Jews John preached to who said, "We have Abraham as our Father" (3:8).

John called them all a "brood of vipers" (3:7). And this is interesting. You talk about a fire and brimstone preacher. John wasn't afraid to let anyone have it. Elsewhere he calls just the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 3:7). Jesus also called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). It's an insult. Like snakes, they are sneaky, poisonous, and deadly. We can see why both John and Jesus would accuse the Pharisees and Sadducees of this. They were the supposed religious leaders in Israel, but they were leading people away from the One True God. But Luke records here that John was saying it to the *crowds* coming to be baptized. And that's kind of weird. They're not his opponents. They had come because they wanted what he was giving.

When people inquire with us about Baptism, we usually don't insult them. We say it's a good thing that they want themselves or their children to be baptized. But John's not wrong. The crowds are a brood of vipers. You and I, apart from Christ, are a brood of vipers. By our nature, we would destroy others in order to benefit ourselves. That's human nature. So John calls them a "brood of vipers," not to turn them away, but to make sure they know why they need Baptism. It's because they are sinful and unclean that they need a Baptism of repentance. Don't be coming to Baptism just because all the rest of the crowd is doing it. And don't be thinking that you'll be fine anyway, just because you are descendants of Abraham. John wants them coming to Baptism knowing they'll be lost without it.

And so us too. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (3:7). John warns us. Repent. Be baptized. Confess your sins. Look to Christ for forgiveness, because he has atoned for all your sins by his death and resurrection. And "bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (3:8). John is very clear, and the Augsburg Confession follows his teaching, that our good works are not part of our repentance. That is, you cannot make it up to God, not in the least bit. We cannot even use our good works to prove to God that we're really sorry. That doesn't get us anywhere with him. The only thing that makes us righteous before God is the blood of Jesus. But that doesn't mean we toss out the whole idea of good works. They are the fruit that follows repentance. To ignore them would be to despise repentance and take God's salvation for granted. Instead, we live as people who are baptized, who have received repentance. And that is totally different from living as a brood of vipers, who only look out for themselves and will destroy others for their own benefit.

So John instructed all people to be charitable, especially with your neighbor. "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (3:11). John is not talking about a political agenda, as if government should take care of the poor. Think what you will about that, but you can't use the Bible to support it, because it's not what John is talking about. He's talking about *you* doing it. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "I pay taxes so that the government can take care of the poor." Your neighbor can't eat your vote. But they can eat a sandwich. If your neighbor is hungry, *you* feed them. If your neighbor lacks clothing, *you* clothe them. And if you can't find a neighbor near you, go to the mission and help, or

sponsor a child somewhere who needs food and clothing. Paying taxes is not the charity God commands.

But, speaking of taxes, you still have to pay them. Two unlikely groups came to John for Baptism: tax collectors and soldiers.

Tax collectors were considered sinners by the Jews, because they collected for the Roman Empire. And John told them not to collect more than they were authorized to (3:13). But what he doesn't say might be just as important as what he does. He did not tell them to quit their jobs. It was right for them to collect taxes, even on behalf of Rome. And it was, therefore, necessary for the people to also pay taxes.

And to the soldiers, John told them not to extort money, but to be content with their wages (3:14). Again, what he doesn't say might be just as important. He did not tell them to quit their jobs. He did not tell soldiers not to kill the enemy when ordered to. That's their job. We can even say it's their calling from God.

In ancient times, soldiers also functioned as police. Today we've divided the police and the military into separate forces, but in ancient times it was one. So John's instruction applies to police as well. This world needs police, because it is a brood of vipers. Our hearts are, by nature, sinful and unclean. And while police are also members of that brood of vipers, God has instituted structures of authority in order to restrain evil.

Defunding the police will not reduce crime. And disbanding armies will not end wars. We can wish that armies and police were not necessary. We can pray that wars will cease. But it is not yet time to beat our swords into plowshares. That day will come, but it is not yet. Therefore, soldiers, police officers, and tax collectors still have legitimate and godly service to render. But God's commandment to them is the same as to all of us in our vocations: be faithful in your responsibilities, and do not use your positions to extort your neighbors, but, instead, to serve them.

And so, dear saints. Our Lord did not leave us to be a brood of viper in the wilderness, destroying others until God destroys us in his wrath. Listen to the admonition of John as he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus. God came to us in human flesh to bear our sins. He rose from the dead to bring us with him into new life. And he is coming again to bring us into the Kingdom we long for, one with perfect peace. So repent. Be baptized. Return to your Baptism by daily confession. Trust Christ for your forgiveness. Look for the coming of his kingdom. And live charitably with your neighbor. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.