

## God empowers our repentance

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 16, 2018

The Third Sunday in Advent (Year C)

(Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18)

**Luke 3:7-18 (MRSV):** *John said 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? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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."*

*And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."*

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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."*

*So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

John the Baptist is such a dramatic and fiery character! I love the way Luke writes about John. We hear his proclamation that Jesus is coming to gather the wheat into his barns, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire!" Then Luke writes "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people!"

Why is such a bold and intimidating message Good News? John's call to repentance sounds like a harsh wake-up call. But John's message is one of incredible good news. For Jesus is coming, and he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John challenges the crowds that come out to be baptized by him. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." What does he mean? First of all, our English language might hide some of what John is saying. When we hear something about "bearing fruit," we might think of an apple tree bearing apples. In the Bible, "fruit" is the produce from any plant—produce that one can eat, or perhaps multiplied seed that one can plant for an even greater harvest the next year. Think of blueberry fruit on a blueberry bush. But also think of other produce that we don't normally call "fruit" in English. Think of beans on a bean plant. The beans are the fruit of that plant.

Or think of the wheat that grows on a wheat plant. These are the multiplied seeds from a single wheat plant. The seeds are the fruit of the wheat plant. Each wheat plant yields a bundle of new seeds, each in a husk of bran. The husks and the stems are not the edible portion—they are the chaff, whereas the fruits of the wheat are the large seed that can be ground and turned into flour and bread. The farmer uses a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff in a process called "threshing," done on a threshing floor. The chaff is burned, but the fruit of wheat is gathered into barns where it can provide food for the farmer and others.

So when John says “bear fruits worthy of repentance,” he is talking about the beneficial results of repentance, like the harvest of wheat from all the patient work of farming the wheat fields. The results of farming start out with both chaff and wheat, so they need to be separated, the chaff to be burned and the wheat to be gathered. The results of repentance also bring a contrast between the old sins and bad habits, and the new fruit of God’s work in us.

John calls the people to fruits worthy of repentance because just going through the motions doesn’t yield anything. What if the farmer simply said “I want to farm my fields today,” but he didn’t work the fields and bring in the harvest. No amount of positive thinking or good intentions will bring in the harvest and feed the farmer and others. So what are the fruits worthy of repentance?

The fruits of repentance are where turning back toward God makes a difference in our lives. We bear the fruit of repentance when our decisions are different, where our actions are different, where our attitudes and responses to others are different. We trust in God more and rejoice in God more, and the difference is shared with others. The crowds ask John “what should we do?” and John’s answer has to do with making a difference in the lives of others, sharing with those who have needs.

This is the challenge that John brings. This is a serious challenge. Repentance is not always easy. Sometimes old habits die hard, and our repentance stumbles if we even try. However, this is also where there is good news in John’s proclamation. For his call to repentance is inextricably connected to his proclamation of Jesus.

Look at what is happening all around John. Look at what God is doing! John is this crazy guy out in the wilderness baptizing people as a sign of cleansing of their sins. And look! All the people are going out to him because they want to be cleansed of their sins! Crowds come to him, and he challenges them not to simply go through the motions. This is not just about their ethnicity as Children of Abraham. It isn’t about privilege, it’s about faithfulness. They ask him “what should we do?” They want to bear the fruit of repentance.

Tax collectors came to John and ask “what should we do?” Understand that tax collectors weren’t just the local IRS. They were agents of an occupying foreign pagan power, taking money from God’s holy people. As a way to enrich themselves, they took more than just the taxes owed. Tax collectors were extortionists. They were hated by the community. And here they were, repenting and seeking to bear fruits worthy of repentance in their own lives. How could that be possible? Weren’t they sinners? What could possibly change them?

Then Roman Soldiers came to John. “What about us? What should we do?” Roman soldiers were the brutal occupying force of Rome, able to abuse the local population simply because they could. They could extort money from people, and they could use false accusations to draw bribes. And the local Jewish peasants could do nothing to stop them. And here they were, repenting and seeking to bear fruits worthy of repentance in their own lives. How could that be possible? Weren’t they sinners and even Gentiles? What could possibly change them?

What if, here at St. Peter & St. Paul, drug dealers came forward during our prayers and confessed their sins and repented and sought to bear the fruit of repentance in their lives? Wouldn't that be amazing? What if human traffickers or dishonest politicians or pornographers stepped forward and repented of these crimes and sought to bear the fruit of repentance? Wouldn't that be earth-shattering? Wouldn't that be a sign of the power of God at work?

Human beings have little power to achieve that kind of turn-around. But God can—and if God is at work in such notorious sinners, maybe God is at work in my life and your life. Maybe we can gain freedom from our bitterness and anger we've held onto for years. Maybe God can free us from the habits that hurt others, habits that we haven't been able to shake. Maybe God can empower us to bear the fruit of repentance too. That's not just good news, that's great news! Jesus said "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

I wonder if you've heard the story of Shon Hopwood. As a young man, Shon was aimless in life and decided to go along with robbing a bank one day. So he robbed a bank and was caught, of course, and sent to prison. While in prison, things began to change for Shon. One thing he did was start reading about law in the prison law library. He became so interested in law that he started giving advice to fellow inmates. He even wrote a legal document that was part of an appeal for a fellow prisoner. The appeal made it to the Supreme Court and won. The quality of Shon's legal work captured a wide notice. When he got out of prison, he got a law degree, was granted an exception to take the Bar exam, and now, at age 43, he is a professor of Law at Georgetown University, bearing the fruit of repentance.

60 Minutes told his story. They left out a lot about how God was at work in Shon's repentance. But there was one line in their piece that hinted at it. Shon said "It was people who went out of their way to give grace to me that made the difference." When Shon got out of prison, a conversation with a pastor for pre-marital counselling brought Shon to finally deal with the guilt he still felt about his past, and to seek Jesus' forgiveness. God was at work in him, not just calling him to repentance, but empowering him for repentance. Jesus said "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance." But really, do you know even one person who has no need of repentance?

The Good News of John's proclamation is that Jesus is coming. Jesus is more powerful than the one who calls to repentance. Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire—not just cleansing you from sin, but empowering you with the presence of God to live a new life. He will burn away the chaff from your life and gather the harvest of good fruit.

Through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit empowers you for repentance. God teaches you what righteousness looks like and empowers you to follow. God picks you up when you stumble, for surely we will stumble. God strengthens you with his Holy Spirit to bear fruits worthy of repentance. God also sets us in communities to support our repentance together. The struggle to do the right thing is impossible on our own. But in the Christian Community, we have support and grace for the journey.

Think of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous who help addicts repent and renew one day at a time. There are other groups in various churches—I have a friend who helps lead a group to support men seeking freedom from pornography.<sup>1</sup> Even just forming close Christian relationships provides the encouragement and accountability we need. We find the wisdom and support, the guidance and strength when we stumble. This is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church. This is the power of God empowering us for repentance.

So when you hear the message of John the Baptist calling us to prepare for Jesus, hear the good news in his proclamation. Jesus is coming, and he is powerful enough to deal with the struggles we face, to root out the things we're stuck in, and to give us new life. He will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He will renew and restore us. This is the call of Advent preparation, the call to receive this gift of God again this Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> It's called "Walking Free" and they deal with more than just pornography. See [www.fellowshipsofwell.org/care/walking-free-for-men/](http://www.fellowshipsofwell.org/care/walking-free-for-men/)