

"Bearing Fruit"  
Luke 3:1-14

December 6, 2015

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Now is a time of preparation for everyone, usually for the celebration of Christmas. It involves shopping for gifts, decorating trees and houses, baking Christmas cookies, and so on. The Christian Church has established the season of Advent as a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus, but in a different way. Rather than outward preparations, the season of Advent calls for preparation of hearts and minds. Although we pay lip service in the Church to such preparation, many Christians don't actually do much of THAT preparation because they are too busy with the other kind of preparation. How DO we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus? John the Baptist, the messenger sent by God to prepare His people for the coming of the Savior, tells us, even though we may not like to hear it.

Our text says, "And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This is the way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah and the dawning of the era of salvation: repentance resulting in forgiveness. But what is repentance? For many, repentance means little more than regret for having done something bad or regret for having been caught doing something bad. For some, repentance might even be regret for not having done more good.

For others, repentance means a deep sorrow over sin for those who really need it – the Gentiles at the time of John the Baptist; unbelievers and really bad sinners at our time. In any case, repentance is reduced to being a feeling – a really bad feeling – reserved for certain people who need it.

John the Baptist's God-inspired message is different. First, the need for repentance is one that all people have – Jews, as well as Gentiles; Christians today, as well as unbelievers. The background and religious heritage of the Jews did not exempt them from the need to repent. John says, "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."

Our background and religious heritage does not exempt us from the need to repent either. To us, John might say, “And do not begin to say, ‘We have Luther as our father’ or ‘We have been confirmed and are church members.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Luther or confirmed church members.” Every last one of us needs to repent.

Secondly, repentance is more than a bad feeling. Repentance “embraces a comprehensive spiritual change that includes sorrow for sin and conversion to a new way of life in Christ.” (Just, p.149) Repentance is more than pious sounding words. Repentance results in actions. John puts it this way, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”

Here’s where we get uncomfortable. While we might be willing to admit that we need to repent in some general way and while we might even be willing to feel true sorrow over actual sins and while we might even be willing to verbally express that sorrow by confessing those sins, we don’t think we need to change, nor do we want to. We may think that part of repentance is kind of optional.

Let’s explore John’s analogy of “bearing fruit.” Imagine a man who really loves apples. He loves them so much that he plants an apple tree. The man is responsible for the tree’s existence. He gives it all the nutrients and water that the tree needs. But the tree produces no apples. Is the man just happy to have a tree? Does he say, “It’s ok that the tree is not producing apples. It’s a fine looking tree with a strong trunk and pretty leaves”? The production of apples is not optional for an apple tree. If it doesn’t produce apples, the man will take an ax and cut it down.

It is the same with God and us. God desires us to do good. He has created us and given us life. He has given us new life through our baptism. We are all fine looking trees in God’s orchard. But God does not want us to have just the strong trunks of sorrow. He does not want us to have just the pretty leaves of pious sounding words. God desires us to bear the fruit – to do the good He desires. He is serious. This is not optional. The warning John gives to the people of his time also applies to us, “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.”

How do we do this since we are sinful by nature and often sinful by choice? We produce fruit the same way an apple tree produces fruit. An apple tree has roots that draw up water and nutrients that strengthen the tree and produce apples.

In the same way, the roots of the faith which God has given us draw up from the Word of God the forgiveness which Jesus Christ won for us by His death on the cross. That forgiveness – full, free, and unconditional – keeps our faith healthy and united to Him.

The same roots of faith draw up from the Holy Sacraments the strength Jesus Christ won for us by rising from the dead. That strength enables us to live a new life producing the fruit of good works.

You have access to that forgiveness. You have access to that strength. You are able to produce fruit pleasing to God. But what exactly is that fruit? The people of John's time wanted to know. We want to know, too. It may surprise you as to what that fruit is. Let us hear John's answer.

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

John does not call the people to perform super spectacular spiritual accomplishments. He doesn't even urge them to go to temple or synagogue more or increase their offerings. He simply urges them to live out their vocations – to serve God by serving their neighbors in the place and situation God has placed them.

It is the same for you and me. We do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance by coming to church. Church is where we come that we might receive that which is necessary for us to bear fruit. Here is not where we serve God, but where God serves us with His gifts. Here is where we can set down our roots and draw up the forgiveness of sins for our past failures to bear good fruit. Here is where we can draw up the spiritual strength we need to produce God-pleasing fruit. We do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance by performing great spiritual things to serve God. God does not need our service, but our neighbor does.

We bear fruit in keeping with repentance when we live out in love our various vocations in serving our neighbor. If you are children, obey and help your parents. If you are parents, care for and serve your children. If you are students, listen to your teachers and learn your lessons. If you are employees, do the work your employer gives you faithfully and cheerfully. If you are quilters, quilt up a storm so that many may be warm. If you are retired, serve your family, your community, and your church in any way that you can. In other words, wherever and whenever your neighbor has need, serve that need in whatever way you can.

Take the time this Advent to prepare for the Savior's coming but in a way different than the world is preparing for Christmas: by repenting. Repent, but in a way different than many Christians repent. Do more than feel bad or say pious words. In genuine sorrow over your sins, turn from sin and turn to Jesus for full and complete forgiveness for all of your sins. But don't stop there. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance by serving those in need through your vocation. What you do will show what kind of tree you are. Jesus says, "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush." (Luke 6:43-44). God has made you a good tree through His undeserved love and the forgiveness of sins earned by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ whose birth to begin this mission we are about to celebrate. God gives you all that you need to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Draw deeply and often here from the wells of His Word and the springs of His Sacraments. Then produce the fruit of a good tree and you shall be prepared for the coming of the Lord. Amen.