

Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist heralds the mighty one "who is coming." John teaches that preparation for God's reign is not a matter of identity but of bearing fruits of merciful justice, radical generosity, and vocational integrity.

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers 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."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

This morning the theme of our worship is to once again remind us of God's direction. We are called to point and reappoint ourselves in the direction of discipleship to the Word of God. Sometimes the 3rd Advent candle is said to direct us to the words of the prophets, who in turn, point us toward the way of salvation.

John the Baptist is the figure that is lifted before us once again in the season of Advent. John the Baptist, perhaps more than any other figure, stands out as the symbol of the Advent Season. For John announces again those Old Testament words: "Prepare the Way of the Lord." John also demonstrates that this preparation is like none other. It is not simply an adding to, a putting on, or an extra thing in the realm of life. Instead, the message of John is very bold. John calls the people to do a complete turnaround, to repent, to change one's entire outlook on the view of self and on the view of the world. John is not known for his kind, pastoral, gentle, and politically correct statements. Instead, he uses illustrations of axes being laid to the trees and trees being thrown into the fire. He uses images like a winnowing fork, stones, and unquenchable fire. He addresses people by saying, "You brood of vipers!" The words of John the Baptist are not going to be quoted in some self-help book like: "How to make friends and win over enemies." John the Baptist is what we might call today a "straight shooter," he goes for the jugular. It seems everything about John the Baptist is rough, even down to his appearance and favorite foods. But yet with such an appearance, and such an approach, it works. People come to him in large crowds we are told, even the soldiers and religious leaders came out to him, notice that he doesn't go to them. John's message is not only to announce the coming Messiah, he is also telling the people that they have a role in the preparation, and their role is to take on

another life view, a God-centered view of the world. And to do so, he says, means a resetting of life's priorities.

Today, to hear the words of the Baptist can be somewhat unsettling. For if, we have a view of life that things are going along relatively well, it is hard to hear a voice of change. In fact, if we strongly believe in "our way or no way," perspectives, not only will we tune out potential difficult messages, but we will also seek to get rid of the messenger.

A story is told of an old mule which fell into a deep hole. The mule's owner, who had really come to dislike his animal, and now had other means of support beyond the mule, decided that the animal was probably either dead or badly injured and was not worth the effort required in trying to retrieve him. Therefore, he told his two sons to just shovel dirt into the hole and give the mule a good burial. The boys shoveled the dirt down on the mule, who was not only alive, but uninjured and determined not to die. So as the dirt fell, the mule just shook it off his back and trampled it under his feet. The two boys kept shoveling and mule kept shaking and stomping until the hole began to fill up and the mule was at last able to make a small leap out of the remaining part of the hole.

The message of John the Baptist can often be like the unwanted mule. We believe we don't need the mule, we have found other means of support, but yet somehow, as much as we try to bury that mule, cover up the message, it somehow doesn't leave us, and keeps knocking at our door. Such is the work of the Spirit. The people who heard John the Baptist's message were not the ones who were necessarily looking for it. In fact, much study suggests that John preached in a very resort-like area, perhaps initially to people who had gained much from life thus far. But yet somehow his words captured them, somehow those words grabbed a place

in them that nothing else on earth could ever grab. Perhaps, some tried to bury it away, but his words, even after his own death, kept knocking on their doors.

If we hear the words of this prophet from the wilderness, if we hear the words "to bear fruit worthy of repentance, if we hear and heed the message of the promised Messiah, that we also, will be agitated to approach things in life from a different perspective; we go from asking questions do I have to share, to instead seeking out what is righteous. We will not be perfect, but we are not expected to be. The message of John the Baptist still has influence and relevance for life today, for even though the promised one arrived in John's lifetime, John's words still today are waiting to be completely fulfilled in the promised return of Christ. Therefore, we are called to take this life message, take this promised road, which calls us to look at the world differently.

Two young friends were once playing together. "Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses all of the time?" asked one boy to his playmate. "No," was the comeback of the other kid, "not if I had my grandma's kind of glasses. She sees how to fix a lot of things, and she sees a lot of things to do on rainy days. She sees when people are really tired and worried, and she will make them feel better. She always sees what you meant to do, even if you don't do things exactly right. I asked her one day how she could see that way all of the time and she said it was the way she learned to look at things as she grew older. So, it must be her glasses," the boy concluded, "which makes her see all those things, and I wouldn't mind having glasses like that."

We are all called to put on Gospel glasses. We are called to recall the past actions of God, and also the future promises of the Messiah. It is

when we do so that we can begin to understand the words of the that Paul writes in Philippians, when he writes: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

We are challenged to see God in our midst in all situations of our lives. When things are difficult we often wonder "where" or "how" God is, and in times of great reward our challenge become of remembering that God is a part of that as well. It is difficult to always see God in our presence, but just because we do not see God here, does not mean God is absent, nor that we will be punished because of our lack of vision. The message of God continues to come at us in various ways, in ways we expect and in the unexpected times. God comes through the easy to hear messages of life, but also God comes in the hard and strenuous times of life. God's word comes from ways we want and desire, but God also raises up people like John the Baptist to once again drive the core message of the Gospel into our lives. Our continual call is to be alert, with eyes wide open to hear, see, touch and feel God's activity in our lives. Amen.