

Sermon Reading: Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ *“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.*

¹¹ *John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”*

¹² *Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”*

¹³ *“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.*

¹⁴ *Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”*

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

¹⁵ *The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps 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 he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*

Sermon Theme: Finding Joy in Repentance

“You brood of vipers!” Even if you aren’t sure what that means, it doesn’t sound like a very nice way of greeting someone. But, then again, I don’t think John was saying that with a lot of joy in his heart either. In fact, when you look at the Gospel reading from Luke 3, it seems like a strange selection for a Sunday where our focus is on God’s gift of joy. John’s talking about repentance with an ax chopping down the unproductive tree and people being thrown into the fires of hell! There doesn’t seem to be a lot of joy at all. But then again, when we talk about repentance, I don’t think joy is one of the first things that comes to mind. For most people, when they hear repentance, they think about being sorry. Sorry that they did something wrong. Sad that they hurt their relationship with someone. Shame because they did something against themselves. Fear because they did something that breaks their relationship with God. It’s hard to see where the joy comes into the picture.

“You brood of vipers!” That’s how John decides to greet the people as they come to hear him preach and to be baptized. Children of snakes, children of deceivers and liars, children of the greatest deceiver, the devil, that’s what he calls this crowd of people. And he asks them, **“Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”** John’s saying, “No one could have told you that you would be able to escape God’s judgment, did they? Who led you to believe that

you could escape God's wrath? You didn't believe it, did you?" Instead of believing the lie, John tells them, **"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham"** (v.8).

The people believe they didn't have to change their actions. They believe that because they were from Abraham's line they would escape God's wrath. They were the Jews, God's chosen people. Because they had this blood connection, eternal life already belongs to them—or so they thought. And still, just in case, they come to John to be baptized. That way, because they followed this outward sign of a religious person with being baptized, they definitely would escape God's coming wrath. They have this double-protection both from their lineage and then this baptism. And so, they thought they were safe. Now, they could have it both ways: have eternal life in heaven and continue in their sinful actions. So, John calls them children following a lie. Children of the devil.

"You brood of vipers!" You probably wouldn't want me to start greeting you that way as you walk into church. But, more often than I am ashamed to admit, I need to hear that. Like the people going out to see John in Luke, I can believe all sorts of different delusions that other people might tell me. We can convince ourselves to believe a lot of other lies we tell ourselves too. No, we might not point to Abraham. But one might point to their membership—being confirmed and baptized in the church—as proof that it should be okay that they have not been in church for some time or even a bad attitude while in worship. Another will point to how they have served the church in the past as protection from being expected to find other ways to serve today. Or, it's simply thinking that by going to church for your hour on Sunday morning that should make up for how you act from the time you leave the parking lot into the next week. But it's not just related to church where we do this. It's our daily lives where one points to their desire to defend a certain cause they believe in or even defending Christianity that should give you protection to speak unlovingly towards other people. Someone else points to being tired and working hard as protection for being short with their spouse and impatient with the kids

We come up with all sorts of different ways to avoid what really should do with our sins. More often than not, we know what we should be doing. We recognize the sin, we confess it, we receive the forgiveness, but then it stops. And then it's back to life as usual until the guilt and shame weigh a little more heavily on your heart. Your conscience is pricked. Then it's back to church to start the whole cycle over again. But we so often seem to have little desire to turn away and leave behind that sin.

Maybe we don't recognize it or we don't want to believe it, but the reason we do this is because we are drawn to the sin. We want to do it. So we convince ourselves we can have it both ways. We want to believe that we can have the joy of eternal life—escape the coming wrath—while at the same time have the "joy" of gratifying our sinful nature. But you can't have it both ways that are exact opposites of each other. Life doesn't work that way. You

can't enjoy all the junk food that you want while also enjoy good health. The chasing after of one means running away from the other. If someone thinks that as long as they follow some outward signs of being religious or a good person that should allow them to chase after the joys of the sinful flesh thinking they will still be able to enjoy heaven, one proves to be following a deceiver. You cannot continue to chase after sin and still have eternal life.

To such people who think they can John warns, **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”** (v.9). There are already individuals who say their prayers and go to church that God intends to chop down and throw into the fires of hell.

People want to believe that joy and being positive comes from ignoring the bad and accepting the wrong. But true joy...eternal joy...is impossible without first acknowledging the seriousness of your sin. If one thinks they can come to church and take the Lord's Supper to ease that aching conscience with the intention of going straight back to that sin, they are not being serious about their sin. True sorrow over sin is more than sorry that you were caught. It's not just being sorry because there will be some not-so-pleasant consequences. Sorrow over sin recognizes that this action isn't an “oops” or accident. Even one sin is enough bad fruit that shows me to be a tree that should be chopped down and thrown into the fires of hell.

So how do we escape the coming wrath? Where do you find joy? John points us to one who is infinitely greater than he is. The one to come is so great that John says he wasn't worthy to do the lowliest of jobs for him: strapping up his sandals.

When we see the one to come, he doesn't look that great when he has flesh and blood like you and me. He doesn't seem so powerful when he suffers and struggles, faces sin and its temptations just like us. But that's your Savior Jesus. If you were to look at him as a tree, his would be so full of good and perfect fruit the branches would be hitting the ground. Not once did he fall into temptation. Not once did he fail to produce good fruit.

But when the Father is winding up to cut down our sparse tree filled with bad and rotten fruit, the Son Jesus steps in and says, “No, cut me down instead. It's not their sin anymore. I've taken it all. All the bad fruit...it's mine.” And so God the Father swings his mighty ax. With all of his wrath and anger for sin he cuts down his own Son on the cross at Calvary. We hear the Son cry out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” as the Father throws him into the fire while Jesus endures hell on the cross. The fruitful tree is cut down. The fruitless tree is spared.

But on that tree where Jesus dies, he gives you and me life. For he would not stay dead. He is raised to life again so that we might never die. And in the place of your sins—that bad fruit—Jesus gives you his perfect life and good fruit. He baptizes you with the Holy Spirit who creates faith in you. By that faith Jesus grafts you into his tree so that when God sees you he doesn't see a brood of vipers, children of the devil. Your Father sees you, his own baptized child, full of good fruit. Sometimes the fruit is not very ripe. Other times it's not the fruit that

someone expects or wants. But it is still fruit. And because we are connected to Jesus, God is pleased with you. Because as his child, God loves you and will not treat you as your sins deserve. God chose you to be his own. He wants you to be with him for eternity. For Jesus' sake who lived, suffered, died, and rose again, God forgives you. That's what brings us true lasting joy.

And so, now what? That's what the crowd asked John in Luke. John doesn't tell them to go do anything over-the-top. He doesn't say to leave everything you have and go be a missionary. He doesn't say sell everything you have and give it away. He shows them you produce good fruit in your daily life with how you treat those around you.

And so we ask, "Now what?" God doesn't tell you to go into a monastery, be a foreign missionary, or give all you have to offerings and the needy. Serving the Lord and others is not reserved for just the one hour on Sunday morning. It includes the other 167 hours during the week too. It's during the drive home after church. It's when you get up for work on Monday morning. It's your life on Wednesday night. It's what you decide to do with your Saturday. It's what you do in your daily life turning away from sinful actions sharing that love Jesus gives you. It's being quick to listen and slow to speak. It's putting someone else's wants before your own. It's being willing to be uncomfortable in a situation to make someone else more comfortable. We strive to live showing the same forgiving, caring, and patient love Jesus gives to us so that others may know the same joy Jesus gives. And when we struggle and fall, when in weakness we do not resist sin and temptation, your loving Savior is there to assure you. He invites you to the Lord's Supper not as an excuse for continued sin, but to empower and strengthen you. He reminds you of your baptism that you are a child of God and sin does not control you. He speaks to you through his Word, "I forgive your sin. Go in peace resisting sin and the devil."

Yes, part of repentance is a sorrow and sadness over sin. But that's only part of it. True repentance comes from the joy of knowing that you have a Savior who loves you and forgives you. And, as we are connected to him, the result is living a joyful fruit-filled life. Amen.