

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, ²“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” ³Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

⁴John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. ⁶They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! ⁹Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The people were flocking to the wilderness, out in the middle of nowhere. They wanted to hear the sounds. They wanted to take in the strange sights. And it wasn't just a few. People came from all over the country, all because they wanted to be part of this strange phenomenon. But this wasn't Burning Man. People came from all across Judea to see John the Baptist, the man clothed in camel hair and eating a diet of locusts and wild honey. Surely some thought him a kook who was having an episode. But he was interesting. And as with anyone interesting, people want to see for themselves. All were invited to come, just as they were, to hear what this man of God had to say.

But John's message was blunt: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” But what did he mean, “repent?” We use that word a lot in church, but do we know what it means? Repentance means a turning around – of the mind, of the heart, or of direction. Repentance involves recognizing our sin and trusting that God has forgiven it. These words from John are a difficult pill to swallow. But they get more difficult: “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” Out in the wilderness, in a barren wasteland, John points out the spiritual desert that was Israel. They needed changing. They needed to be turned around.

Repentance requires facing what gets in the way. We make excuses and try to justify ourselves when we have done wrong. We tell ourselves that we don't shoulder the blame, at least not all the blame. We get defensive. Instead of just fessing up to what we've done, we dig in get mean. This was the condition of the Israelites too. They thought they were good with God because they tried to do right and they came from Abraham's line. But John the Baptist tells them that none of this is right. They were hiding from repentance behind their heritage and behind their twisted sense of self-righteousness.

So, what does John tell them? "Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John was not going to let the people continue living in their cultural lie that they were fine with God just how they were. No, there would be a clearcutting of every tree that was not truly repentant. The fire of hell awaited everyone who thought of themselves as good enough for God. This is not to say they were completely blind to sin. I'm not sure any Israelite would have claimed they were perfect. But they would have claimed that they had done enough good to cover for the few bad things. This mindset is prevalent today. It's the kind of mindset that says, "God doesn't mind if I play around with this pet sin. He knows I care for him." And with that, we don't live in repentance. We live in arrogance. We might trust God to forgive sins, but we are obviously not sorry about our sins if we fully intend to continue on in them.

Brothers and sisters, I will not call you a brood of vipers or accuse you of having impenitent hearts. But I will warn you that self-righteousness lurks in every heart. Arrogantly clinging to sin will lead to being chopped down and burned in fire for eternity. Repent! Truly repent! Because false repentance is a danger too. You come before God, throw yourself down before him in tears, and tell him you are so sorry for the sin you fully plan to commit again. You think if you go through the theatrics God will be convinced. But he knows your heart. He knows if you are sincere and he knows if you are full of it. And before you try and tell yourself you are so obviously sincere, ask yourself this: Do you hate the sin that has made you its pet, or do you hate the fact that you have been put into this position?

Don't take these words from John the Baptist lightly. They are a warning that many will perish forever because they refuse repentance. Fruitless trees get cut down. Chaff gets burned. There must be change – real, honest change. But we are powerless to make that change ourselves.

But that's the job of John the Baptist. He serves up severe law to prepare us for why Christmas is so necessary. I've told this story many times in Bible class and probably sermons too, but when I served as a vicar in Ohio, we had a preschool classroom right across the hall from my office. The children's Christmas service was about a week before Christmas, and those twenty-something three and four year-olds showed up to sing their hearts out. My supervising

pastor had asked me to give a Christmas devotion in the middle of it. Many of the families in the school were unchurched, so this gave an awesome opportunity to share Jesus with them. At one point in the devotion I said: “You’re a sinner. I’m a sinner. And even your sons and daughters in their beautiful Christmas outfits are sinners. This is why Jesus came.” And two moms gave me two of the dirtiest looks I’ve ever seen. Their kids were good enough. They didn’t need a Savior. Jesus loved them Jesus how they were. It’s that same delusion in your heart and my heart that at times thinks that way too. “I’m good enough. I don’t need a Savior, not for that sin. Jesus loves me just the way I am.”

It’s true Jesus loves you. It’s why he invites you out into the wilderness to tell you hard truths and to bring about that change that you so desperately need. Don’t hide from sin. Face it. Repent of it.

John was not the solution to sin. Instead, he was the one sent by God to point to the solution: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” John wouldn’t even be worthy of carrying the sandals of the one who would come to bring salvation. A messenger of God? Yes. A prophet of the Most High? Absolutely! But the Messiah? Not a chance!

Jesus arrives to remove what we cannot remove. We come as we are – weighed down by sin and on the path that leads to struggle and death. There is nothing those people in the wilderness could do to rid themselves of the stain of sin and there’s nothing we can do either. But then John says, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” From Jesus comes cleansing, being washed and made white as snow. From Jesus comes regeneration, new life in the one who took his own life back up after death. And from Jesus comes the gift of faith through his Holy Spirit.

But what about the trees being cut down? What about the wheat and chaff? He is a Judge, and as our worship theme this morning states, our Judge is coming. Who is this Judge? He’s the Judge who has already been judged in our place. He’s the Judge who has already declared us righteous in God’s sight. He’s the Judge who comes not to condemn us, but to gather us, his grains, into his barn.

It is him who works repentance in us. To many, admitting to sin is accepting a bitter judgement, positioning oneself for hell. You know people who truly believe they could never be right with God for what they’ve done. And that shows us that repentance is more than just feeling bad over sin. It also involves trusting that those sins were paid for at the cross. So, you can go to God open about your sins. He already knows them, but he also forgives them, no matter how bad you think they are. You can come to Jesus as you are, but you won’t leave the same. God’s grace always transforms. The good news of the gospel always makes us something new and glorious.

So, as you hear that your sins are forgiven today, you will leave as you aren't. Because repentance is not just a moment. It's a way of life. Martin Luther said that the entire life of the Christian is daily repentance. He pointed to the waters of baptism, an act that happened one time, but has continual benefits. Daily you drown the old Adam, that sinful nature, in its waters. Daily you rise anew to live for God as his new creation.

So, what are these fruits of repentance that John the Baptist talks about? Well, they involve honest confession. Take your sins to God. Pray not only for the sins you are aware of, but those you are hopelessly oblivious to. Understand that you are not a good person that sin comes out of. You are a sinner who would be worthless if not for the blood of Jesus purifying you from all unrighteousness. The fruits of repentance involve clearing the road for Christ, removing those obstacles of temptation and sin we often place in our paths. Hate sin. Do not tolerate it in your own life. No excuses. No defensiveness. Just utter hatred for that which would take your eyes off Jesus and put them on this world.

You can't do this alone. These fruits come about because Jesus has come near. We produce these fruits, not to earn God's favor, but because we already have it. The Holy Spirit kindles a fire in us that continually purifies and empowers us to live in thanks to God.

Advent is the season for repentance precisely because Christ is coming. As we prepare our homes, we should focus even more on preparing our hearts. So remember, the Judge who comes is the Savior who loves. And repentance does not terrify the believer. It sets her free to live the life that God has called her to. Stand before God's throne and cast all your troubles on him, trusting that he will forgive you and shape you more and more according to his perfect will for you. Amen.