

⁷So John kept saying to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance! Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ⁹Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰The crowds began to ask him, “What should we do then?”

¹¹He answered them, “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same.”

¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³To them he said, “Collect no more than what you were authorized to.”

¹⁴Soldiers were also asking him, “And what should we do?”

He told them, “Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ.

¹⁶John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.

The season of Christmas can bring out true joy. People seem happier and more patient. The amount of time and money people give to charity is through the roof. But the season of Christmas can also bring out a lot of pain. There is hurting that comes because of the people we’ve lost to death or pushed away with selfishness. There are empty seats at the table. Some of the hopes and dreams from this year and years past now look like little more than failure. It can bring out pain when we look at our lives and just aren’t all that satisfied with them. This is a season that reminds us of all that we have. But we also notice just how much we’re lacking. Because of this, it’s easy for the joy of Christmas to turn to anger and sadness. But today, as we look to the John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, we understand a little bit more what his coming brings. Christmas brings the change we need to our lives.

Today’s Gospel picks up where last week’s let off. John’s been preaching this baptism of repentance, making straight the hearts and minds of the people for the coming of Jesus. But this week I want to spend some time focusing on the kinds of people who would come out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist’s message and be baptized. As we look, we see different kinds of people. There are tax collectors. These people were hated more than people today feel about the IRS, because many of them were actually cheating people out of more than they owed. They were seen as slimy and widely despised by their neighbors. There are soldiers. These are probably Roman soldiers, the captors of the Jewish people. Having to serve in the Jewish world meant they were constantly hated for their authority. But they were not just victims of Israel’s hate. It was not all that uncommon for the soldiers with all their weapons to use them for extortion. They could bully the people into giving them money. They could threaten legal action against these second-class citizens if they did not get their way. Just from these two examples, we can see the kinds of people who were out in the desert. They were people whose professions were not sitting right with them. They were the outcasts of society. They came to

John because they thought the wild man in camel fur would be able to break them from their profound despair and feeling of emptiness.

I don't think the worries of these people in the wilderness are all that different from the worries we experience. They almost certainly felt emptiness when it came to their relationships with other people. They might have had some riches and worldly successes, but there's a reason they were out there in the wilderness to hear John. While we don't know exactly why all these people came to the desert, we can surmise that most were unsatisfied with their current state of affairs in life.

Again, Christmastime, for better or worse, offers us time for introspection. We get time off of work, and it can lead us to measure how much we like our jobs by how much we're itching to get back when the break is over. We have family celebrations and watch Christmas movies with family celebrations, and sometimes we wonder if the relationships in our own families are just as dysfunctional as these over-the-top Hollywood portrayals. Christmas gives us a lot of time to think.

So, do we have some dissatisfaction in life that leads us to go find John in the desert? Are we bothered by the way things are going and the way we've treated other people, and want some change? We should not be surprised that these people were willing to travel so far to see John, because we've got so many of the same problems that they did.

John was going to help them, but he didn't let them rest on their laurels. He says, "Do not even think of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones." A common excuse among the Jewish people in that time was that they were the children of Abraham. They were the covenant people of God. But they had forgotten that that covenant relationship with God involved more than just wearing the title of "God's people" like a merit badge. It involved an actual relationship with God, a dependance on the love and mercy he had constantly shown his sinful and rebellious people. And the works-based theology of the Pharisees didn't show the God of love, but a god of anger and of vengeance, a god that resembled all the idols of the world.

As these people came out into the wilderness as the outcasts of society, they had finally given up on the notion that they could accomplish what the religious leaders prescribed. And John made sure to hammer home that they should not even think about clinging to the sinking life preserver of their Jewish heritage.

This is where the repentance comes in. As we talked about last week, repentance is moving from sin and guilt to forgiveness by God's grace. The people were being shown their sinfulness and inability to keep God's law. That's why John called them a brood of vipers. That's why he made the threat that the axe was at the foot of the tree. They were living their lives for the wrong reasons, and that's what was causing so many problems. They were living by compulsion and not because of joy. And all of it has no meaning before God.

There is a lot of law here. John the Baptist was speaking with fire because he knew how ingrained work-righteousness was in the people's hearts and minds. If we're being honest, the belief in work-righteousness pervades our lives as well. The self-help aisle of the bookstore is filled with books that tell you that a little bit more work or the right attitude can fix any self-doubt you have. Our sinful hearts are also partial to this ideology, always trying to insert ourselves into God's work of saving, whether it is thinking we finish Jesus' work or we make some choice to believe in him. There are certainly times that we need to be warned against resting on our laurels and trusting in ourselves.

But John's message is not all harsh warnings. We hear the last verse of the section in front of us: "Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people." After recognizing the harshness of sin and our inability to save ourselves, it's time to hear the good news of Jesus. And that's exactly

what John does. In fact, when the people started to believe John the Baptist might be the promised Messiah, John pointed them to Jesus: “I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

The Savior Jesus would offer more than John could offer. John was just the appetizer, getting them ready for the full meal that was on its way. Jesus would come, live the life that these people were banging their heads against the wall trying to live and failing. Then he’d die to pay for the sins of the world and rise to make it clear that death no longer holds us. John points to Jesus, because for all of our personal struggles, for all of our discontentment about the lives we lead and the way we act, Christ is the only solution. He’s the one who frees us from the burden of sin and the law to show us that our salvation is not self-wrought. Instead, God’s mercy and grace leads him to send his one and only Son to forgive us and make us right with him.

No longer would the people live under the compulsion of the law. Because of John’s message of the Savior’s sacrifice, they would live free from the law. They would live in joy and thankfulness. Isn’t that what motivates us to show such warmth in this season where the temperatures cool? Isn’t that what swells our hearts even as our schedules are slammed with all kinds of extra responsibilities?

As these people came to John, they heard the realities of sin and the salvation God was about to send. And that led them to ask the question, “What should we do?” The people asked what they should do, and John told them to share what they had with the needy. The tax collectors asked, and John told them not to cheat people out of more than they owed. The soldiers asked, and John told them not to rob or threaten the people they were supposed to be protecting. These are fruits of repentance, the ways these people would live if they were sorry for their sins and moved to joy by God’s forgiveness.

God calls on us to produce fruits in keeping with repentance as well. He calls us not to exploit those we might have leverage over in our different roles in life. He calls us to show generosity and love to those who are struggling, even if those who are struggling are also the hardest to love. He calls us to follow him, keeping away from those things God calls evil and clinging to what he calls good. He calls us to look on people in the same light that God looks upon us: helpless sinners who are only rescued by the grace of God in Jesus. All-in-all, God’s call to us is to live in joy for him and not for ourselves and our own sinful desires.

What does this faith-filled repentant living do? It constantly reminds us of the why. We serve, not to earn favor with God or the world, but because we already have favor with God in Christ. And when people live out their faith, it makes society peaceful for others. A businesswoman who does not cheat her clients makes their lives more prosperous. A judge or lawyer who deals in truth and justice sets the stage for society where crime is not glorified, and abuse of the legal system is not justified. Fathers who lead their wives and kids in the truths of God’s word often see stability in their marriages and families, in their communities and schools, and in greater society in general. The benefit of producing the fruits of repentance is that it helps everyone around you. Most importantly though, is that living in joy allows us to reflect the light of Jesus on a world full of people just like those who knew they were missing something and came to hear John.

So, if this Christmas season is bringing out a lot of pain, if it’s reminding you of regrets or frustrations, if it’s starting to stress you out, stop putting your trust and worth in yourself and look to Jesus. He is what we wait for with such anticipation because he’s the only reason we can feel free to live in joy. Dear friends, your sins have been washed away in him. Now produce those fruits of repentance with joy. Amen.