

## **“Beware: fire again!” Luke 3:7-18**

**He said therefore 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? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. 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. 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.” 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.” As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.**

Today we celebrate the third Sunday in Advent and we continue to meditate upon the message of John the Baptist as it is recorded in the gospel according to Luke. And what a message it is!

**“He said therefore 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?”**

There is something that our culture, and we along with it, have lost. That is ability to hear criticism. We have mastered this skill, that whenever someone criticizes what we do, or what we believe, we perceive it as an assault to a person.

We assume that criticism can’t come out of love, only out of hate. How do you dare?! Who are you to judge me?! It makes impossible to help someone who err either in their beliefs or in their behavior. Because if you want to help and dare to say something critical, you are labeled a hater, bigot, unloving and narrow person.

John didn’t care about it. Neither did his listeners. They could distinguish a valid critique from an assault. Calling the crowds ‘brood of vipers’ meant calling them children of Satan. So? This is who we all are before the Holy Spirit makes us children of God.

Contrary to many people today, those who heard John’s preaching were honest enough to admit that they were sinners, brood of vipers, and that with their lives

they deserved God's wrath. This is why they were keen to seek the forgiveness to avoid the coming wrath.

I wish more people would have the same honesty today. Then we could appreciate God's love and care for us, also when He points to our sins and failures. Sure, we may not like it, when God points to our sins.

But He does it so that we could repent, receive His forgiveness, and turn away from our sins with the help of the Holy Spirit. As you are made children of God, your Father simply desires that you live as His children, blessed and joyful lives.

Therefore **“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.”**

Many among the Jews believed that being a descendent of Abraham granted them God's favor, and salvation. If only you were born an Israelite and belonged to God's people, you should be OK. This is what John was preaching against.

Don't deceive yourselves, your bloodline will not save you! Our analogy today would be “stop claiming that you are a Christian” only because your parents were Christians, or because you were baptized, or because you are a nice person, or because you sometimes come to the Divine Service.

But instead, as John said: **“bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”**

This is it. Don't be somebody only by name. Don't abuse the name of Christian by not living as one. You know how so many today understand what it means to be a Christian.

If you are nice, if you do your best to live a happy life, and sometimes ask for God's help when you can't solve your problems on your own. So you don't bother God too much and you don't want to be bothered by Him either.

Being a Christian begins with repentance. It begins with recognizing that we are idolaters who trust many other things more than true God. That we care much more about ourselves, about our feelings and our self-esteem, about our wants than about the Triune God. That we need repentance and forgiveness daily. Daily, not weekly, not monthly, not once during Advent season, but daily.

John preached against this attitude of self-complacency and apathy towards God's word. Listen to God as He speaks to you! Learn what His will for your life is, repent of your rebellion against Him, be honest with your God, for He knows your heart anyway.

Repent and hear the wonderful words of forgiveness. And together with these words receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is that invisible force

which step by step transforms our evil hearts, makes you into a good tree, and helps you to bear good fruits.

What are these fruits? To live according to the Creator's design. Loving your God more than anything, trusting Him more than anything is days good and especially in days bad. Coming into His presence where He invites to you bless you.

If we want to know where we can keep these three the most important commandments, the answer is – here. In the Divine Service. This is where we as Christian keep them, coming with repentant hearts, and empty hands and being blessed by God's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

And once we have been strengthened by the Spirit, we are sent to love all people in our lives as ourselves. All people, especially those who don't deserve it. For they need it the most. Caring for them, considering them as more important than ourselves. This is how we are to bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

**“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 good is to be in Christ's Church! How good is to receive His Holy Spirit as He comes to us in His Word and in His Sacraments. For as we do it, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit Himself will make us into fruitful trees. We can't change our hearts, but He can.

This is God's promise that His Word which He speaks to us will not return empty. As you hear Christ speaking to you through your pastor, the Holy Spirit comes to you and shapes you. He makes you to desire what is good and to do what is God pleasing. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in you.

This analogy with trees actually is very helpful. It reminds that we and God the Creator and not on the same level. He is the Creator. We are His creatures. He made us with a certain purpose in mind. And He expects us to fulfill this purpose: to bear good fruits.

After the Fall we all are fruitless trees, and this is why Jesus came, to recreate us, to make us good and fruitful again. This is what He does when He speaks to us, when He feeds us with His life-giving body and blood, when He gives us His Spirit.

If a tree doesn't bear fruit, but only uses and dries the soil... what happens with such a tree? Right, it is cut down and thrown into fire. No offence! This is what John proclaimed.

Why did he say that? To offend anyone? Or because he was not loving enough a person? No, because the Triune God sent John to warn people, to call them to

repentance so that they can inherit the eternal life. John's message is a message from the loving God who desires to have you in His Kingdom.

It is a message from the Creator who knows what is going to happen, the restoration of the whole creation, and cleansing of all evil from the face of the Earth. He knows this is going to happen and He wants all His little rebellious creatures, also each of you, to live with Him in renewed creation, in His presence, rejoicing forever.

People took John's words seriously. **"The crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"** What should our fruits be? To summarize what John replied to many different people we could say two things.

First, be content and generous with what God has entrusted to. Don't be greedy, don't believe Satan's lies that more stuff will make your life happier and more fulfilled. It won't. But this is what so many are guilty of.

Coveting and gathering more and more stuff which we really don't need. Trusting that it will give us what only true God can give – true joy and fulfillment. Instead, as John said, share your God given resources to help those who really are in need.

Second thing was – be faithful in your vocations. Whatever your vocation is, don't abuse it, don't use it for unfair personal gains. Use your vocation to serve your neighbors, with all your talents and knowledge, so that your Creator can use you, delivering His blessing to people around you.

The great thing for us, Christians, is to know that we can do all of this with sure knowledge of God's favor. We are not to do these things to merit forgiveness or to earn the eternal life. They are already yours. That is most certainly true.

We are called to do these things to fulfill our purpose, to be good trees, to please our God and to express our gratitude for everything that He has done for us.

**As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.**

Because John was preaching with authority many begun to wonder whether he was the Christ. John said clearly: "I am not Him. But when He comes He will baptize you with the Spirit and fire, and the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

Luke called this message – good news. Interesting, isn't it? But good news it is. John, sent by God, simply called people to repentance, but then came Jesus – to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

To baptize simply means to purify, cleanse, wash. John did it with water. But you were baptized not only by water, but also by the Holy Spirit, when your pastor following Jesus command said: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

What about the fire? In the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments the imagery of fire is often present when the holy God reveals Himself. Fire is used to depict God's holiness. God's holiness is the reason why He can't be with us right now.

Our sinfulness and God's holiness fit together as well as fire and chaff does. You know what happens when these two meet. The same would have happened if the holy God would appear to us in His glory.

And this is what will happen when Christ comes back in His glory with all His angels. This is when baptism with the fire will take place. Nothing sinful and unclean will be able to stand in the presence of the holy God.

So, why did Luke call these good news? For this is what they are for you. You, who are baptized with the Holy Spirit, who keep receiving the Holy Spirit by the Word and the Sacrament, you can rejoice in these words.

We couldn't stand before Christ on our own, but we can do it in the power of God's own Spirit. While His holiness will bring destruction to His enemies, His children, that is – you, sealed, covered and filled with the Holy Spirit will rejoice with ultimate joy.

These news give us the reason for joy and hope not only in this season, but every day. Trusting not in our goodness, but in God's unshakable promises. He promised to be with you till the end of this age, and then – to have you with Him forever.

And even if we fail our Father again and again, He will never fail us. He always keeps His promises. This is most certainly true.

Amen.