

Good News???
December 12, 2021

Good morning, Church; the Church that is here and the Church that is there. And to the church that is there, to some of you I say, "Hey!" Claire and Carrie and Keith and Donna and Carolyn and Jean, I know all of you are watching this morning. Welcome!

I want to read a passage of scripture today taken from Luke, chapter 3. We continue with the story of John the Baptist. Now, as I read these words, I want you to listen for the good news.

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? 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. 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." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with the one who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 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." The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I is coming, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

We make a lot of assumptions, don't we? People assume a lot about preachers, I found out when I became one. One of the things they assume is, they assume that pastors grew up in a Christian home. And I just didn't. The first time I remember ever attending a church of any type, I was 10 years old, going on 11. And I went with my uncle's wife and his children to a church. In the South we very lovingly and affectionately call them Holy Rollers. I can tell by your reaction you know the term. Now, this is the first time I'd ever been in church before in my life. And this particular congregation, they did a lot of shouting. They spoke in tongues. They didn't walk up and down the aisles, they ran up and down the aisles. And they got down on the ground and rolled around, hence Holy Rollers. There's nothing wrong with that at all. I understand it perfectly now. And if that's how you choose to worship, praise God. But probably for a 10-year-old and his first experience at church, that was not the right one. It scared the bejeebers out of me. It wasn't long after that, though, that my family began to attend church on occasion and my dad accepted Christ. And then once he accepted Christ, then we went to church every Sunday. You know, I hear people sometimes say today, "You know, Pastor, I find it hard to get up and go to church on Sunday," or "I find it hard to get my kids to go to church on Sunday." When I think back of my early years in that, I don't ever remember it being an option and if it's not an option then it ain't hard. Right? It's not an option. So, we went to church every Sunday. And the little church we went to, I owe a great deal.

That is where I accepted Christ. That is where I learned a deep and abiding appreciation for the Bible and the need to study diligently. In this little church if you went home not feeling bad about yourself, well, quite frankly, the preacher did not bring his 'A' game that day. I remember almost every Sunday going home and feeling like a dirty dog. And I asked a mentor about that when I was an older teen and he said, "Well, John, two things. Number one: if you would change the way you live, you wouldn't feel guilty all the time." And he said, "And number two: you feeling guilty is just God reminding you that He loves you too much to leave you in your sin." So that is actually John's good news, that you feel bad when you go home. John the Baptist would have fit right in with that little church.

John's message was a message of judgment but it was also good news, good news on several different fronts and we'll get to that in just a moment. Now, the setting in which he preached was something we can identify with really well. It was a desert. And in the summertime here, in my limited experience, it's dry. And a little spark and a wind like we had yesterday and you would have yourself a fire in a hurry, wouldn't you? Well, John was using the imagery around him. He was in a desert and oftentimes there would be a spark that would catch the underbrush on fire. And there are a lot of vipers in that area and these little snakes would come out of the grass trying to get away from the fire. And his message was, "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee the coming wrath?" It doesn't sound like good news, but it is good news. Here's why. You see, they thought that because they were descendants of Abraham, they didn't need to repent of their sins, they didn't need to change. They thought that because of their racial privilege and their ritual, that they were automatically in right relationship with God. And John said, "No, no, no, no, no! It's more than religion. It is relationship. Don't say to me," he said, "that you have Abraham as your father, because God can make these rocks children of Abraham."

The way I would say it today is: going to church doesn't make you a Christian. Let me say that again. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car. It is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. John said, "Repent. Not only repent, but produce fruits. If you don't produce fruits after you were baptized, all you got was wet. Produce fruits." It reminds me of a story of a new pastor at church. It was different than our church. We have a church that has what we call episcopal polity. That means that I am assigned. A bunch of you were in the military, I know. I've been around a lot of military personnel. You know how in the military you fill out this little form about where you want to go? Hahaha! And they send you where they want you, right? Okay, it's the same thing about this church. I have never asked to leave a Methodist Church and I've been transferred all over the place. Anyway, in some congregations, they have congregational polity and that means they have to go out and find their minister. And this little church, they found their minister and they brought this person in and he preached his first sermon to as a test sermon, and they thought it was the best sermon they had ever heard in their entire life and they hired him on the spot. Next Sunday, he preached the same sermon again. And they said, "Well, it was good warmed over." The third Sunday he preached the same sermon again. So, they called him on the carpet and said, "Now, sir, the first time it was good, second time was okay, but now it's getting redundant. Do you have another sermon? When are you going to preach this other sermon?" And he said, "I'll preach the second sermon when you do what I said in the first sermon."

See, John preached for results. He said, "Go produce fruit," and he was extremely effective. And the crowds, it says in Luke, the crowds said, "What should we do?" And John basically gives two answers. The first one is: "If indeed you have repented of your sins, the fruit you shall produce is generosity. If you have money, share it. If you have food, share it. If you have stuff, share it. If you have joy, if you have love, if you have encouragement, whatever you have, share it right where you're at." Tax collectors came to him and said, "Well, what should we do?" He said, "Well, just collect what you're supposed to." Soldiers came and said, "What should we do?" He said, "Don't use your position to extort." Note what he says. He doesn't say, "Go be somebody else. Go do something else. Go get a different career." He says, "Be godly where you are right now, in the life that you have. Live it in a manner that is godly." As I was reading through this several weeks ago, it occurred to me to ask this question. Can people tell you are a Christian by the way you do your job; people over you, people under you? Do they at least say, "You know, that's a good person"? Can they tell you're a Christian by the way you live? I'm looking at a few of you who are retired. Can people tell that you're a Christian by the way you live in retirement? Do your neighbors go, "Wow, that is a good person!" See, that's what John was saying. Produce fruits. You don't have to go be something else. Just be godly, where you are. You know, I celebrate the fact that this church is mission-minded and we support foreign missions and we support local missions. And one of my dreams for this congregation is that we will get back to our roots and start going on mission trips, physically. My dream is that for every year, our youth go on a mission trip, at least. But you don't have to go anywhere to be a missionary. You don't have to go anywhere to have a positive impact on the people around you. That's what John was saying. He was saying, "After you have been baptized, go home and produce fruits." And that is what he says to us today. John preached the way he did to prepare for the coming of Messiah. That is a second note of good news. I view John like I view a coach. If you've ever played athletics, you'll know that sometimes coaches can get a little excited. And I view John as a coach, as he prepared the way. He may have beat people into submission and Jesus may have loved people into acceptance, but the outcome was to be the same. The results were what is important, then and now. So, I say I'm Christian. Many of you say you're Christian. Are we producing the fruit? Are we bearing fruit? Do our colleagues, our classmates, our neighbors, the waitress at the restaurant, do they say, "Okay, there's something about them..."

Let's pray.

Lord, during this season of remembering the greatest gift ever given, remind those of us who claim your name as our own to produce fruits, to share the gift so that others might experience what we have experienced. May we be those who prepare the way for those around us. In Thy name we pray. Amen.