

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 8, 2024 (3rd Sunday in Advent, Year C)
Given a week early
Luke 3:7-18

A number of years ago a couple traveled to the offices of an Adoption Society in England to receive a baby. They'd been on the waiting list a long time. They had been interviewed and carefully scrutinized. Now at last their dreams were to be fulfilled. But their day of happiness was another's day of pain.

Arriving at the offices of the Adoption Society they were led up a flight of stairs to a waiting room. After a few minutes they heard someone else climbing the stairs. It was the young student mother whose baby was to be adopted. She was met by the lady responsible for the adoption arrangements and taken into another room. The couple heard a muffled conversation and, a few minutes later, footsteps on the stairs as the young mother left. They heard her unrestrained sobbing until the front door of the office was closed. Then, there was silence.

The lady in charge then led them next door. In a little crib was a six-week-old baby boy. On a chair beside it was a brown paper bag containing a change of clothes and two letters. One of these, addressed to the new parents, thanked them for providing a home for her baby and acknowledged that under the terms of the adoption each would never know the other's identity. Then the young mother added one request. Would they allow her little son to read the other letter on his eighteenth birthday? She assured them that she hadn't included any information about her identity.

The couple entrusted that letter to a lawyer and one day the young man read the message which his mother wrote, with her heart breaking, on the day when she parted with him.

I wonder what she wrote? If you had to condense all you feel about life and love into a few precious words, what would you say? You'd have no time for the trivial. You wouldn't be concerned about economics, politics, the weather, the size of your house or the type of your car. At a time like that you'd want to dwell on the things that really matter, on what life was all about and what things were absolutely essential.

Prophets ALWAYS spoke with that kind of URGENCY. John the Baptist followed in the great tradition of the Hebrew prophets, and prophets KNEW that their TIME was running out. They didn't HAVE time for the TRIVIAL stuff. Their message was always direct and simple and clear. In Advent we hear the Baptist echo the prophet Isaiah's words: repent, prepare the way of the Lord. And today John adds ANOTHER prophetic word: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

The crowds gathered at the Jordan ASKED John, "WHAT then should we do?" And like the prophet he is, John goes right ahead and TELLS them. But if you want to know what "bearing fruit worthy of repentance" means, notice that NOT ONCE does John tell them to do something that WE might call "religious." He didn't say, "Go to church every week" or "Read your Bibles every day" or "Pray to God THREE TIMES each day" or "Go to seminary and become a pastor" or "Leave everything and become a missionary." Nothing we would EXPECT John to say.

What I find EXTRAORDINARY ABOUT this is how ORDINARY, MUNDANE, if not downright OBVIOUS, John's instructions are. I mean, this isn't rocket-science here; it's the logic of the classroom and the playground that most of us learned in KINDERGARTEN: share, be fair, don't bully.

THREE different groups of people ask him what they should do, and all THREE of John's answers come RIGHT out of their daily lives, things they SEE every day, even at work, things they DO every day.

His instructions may be somewhat obvious, but they're also DOABLE. John doesn't tell the crowds to STAY with him out in the wilderness; he doesn't ask the TAX-collectors to BETRAY Rome; and he doesn't urge the soldiers to a life of PACIFISM. Instead, he points to the VERY places where

they ALREADY live and work, laugh and love, struggle and strive, and suggests that THOSE places are exactly WHERE God CALLS them to BE, where God is at WORK IN them and THROUGH them, for the sake of the world.

Bearing fruit worthy of repentance is an unqualified concern, not for YOURSELF, but for your NEIGHBOR. It's SHARING yourself – your time, your talents, your possessions – with OTHERS. It's living FOR others.

Instead of saying, "I have two coats! Isn't that great?" it says, "I can SHARE my coats with YOU! Here, TAKE one!" Instead of saying, "I have so much food that I need a BIGGER FREEZER to STORE it all!" it says, "Let me get YOU something to eat." Instead of, "I had to bend a few rules, but I made a KILLING on that deal!" it says, "I'm content with my honest wages."

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance." The word "worthy" originally comes from the image of a balance scale – one side needs to weigh the SAME as the other side. So "worthy" has the idea of being "WORTH the SAME as" or "measuring up to." But for CHRISTIANS, being worthy doesn't mean tearing ANOTHER person DOWN, so that WE can measure UP; it means building the OTHER person up, so THEY can know the peace and the joy and the love that WE feel.

John the Baptist is pointing us to all the places we can LIVE our faith, HERE and NOW. Even in the midst of a culture that, without a DOUBT, and ESPECIALLY at CHRISTMAS, favors INDULGENCE over compassion, and SELF over sacrifice, RIGHT THERE in the MIDST of it all, God MEETS us WHERE we are, ACCEPTS us AS we are, and makes USE of us to CARE for those AROUND us.

If you want to know what bearing fruit worthy of repentance looks like, you should see this. You may have seen this on our social media, but we can't use the regular audio in worship. My daughter Annabelle made this for us.

Show video "First Lutheran Church Welcome"

I love this place. God is PRESENT, God is WORKING in our CHURCH AND in our DAILY lives. In the dependability of a parent, in the faithfulness of a spouse, in the attentiveness of a friend, in the hard work of an employee, in the HONESTY of an EMPLOYER, in the dedication of a volunteer; and in the generosity of THIS CONGREGATION'S OUTREACH, in the compassion of those who visit the sick or homebound or imprisoned. And in a MULTITUDE of OTHER ways, God is present. God is THERE. God is COMING to us, AMID our imperfections and failings, to call us to MORE, promising to MEET us in the NEED of our NEIGHBOR, and to claim us as God's OWN, EVEN when we fall short.

As somebody once put it, "RICH isn't what you HAVE; rich is WHO you have BESIDE you." Well, this sacred season comes along each year to REMIND us WHAT we have beside us – that God is, EVEN now, REACHING OUT to us with open arms, that God WANTS to GIVE us the GREATEST gift of all: His Son Jesus, who IS peace, who IS love, who IS joy.

And having RECEIVED that PERFECT gift, God wants us to SHARE it with others. But NOT JUST HERE, not here; God wants us to share it out THERE.

So, as John would say, "Go, and bear fruit WORTHY of repentance." Amen.