

## Luke 3:7-18

<sup>7</sup>So 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? <sup>8</sup>Therefore 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. <sup>9</sup>Even 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.”

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

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

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

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

<sup>14</sup>Soldiers 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.”

<sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John could be the Christ. <sup>16</sup>John 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. <sup>17</sup>His 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.”

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

## Joy

### I.

It was with a sense of joy that you felt you could legitimately hold your head high if you were a member of their group. They were of the aristocracy. Theirs was the organization that held most of the political power among the Jews of the day. They had allied themselves with the Roman rulers. From their ranks came much of the priesthood, especially the high priests. They stuck mainly to the Torah—the first 5 books of the Bible—the books written by Moses. They didn’t have much use for many of the prophets. They rejected the “traditions of the elders” and stuck to the simple letter of the Law as recorded by Moses himself. They were the elites. They were the proud. They were the Sadducees.

The other group of prominent citizens came more from the common people, but they, too, had a sense of joy in which they held their heads high. They felt there was much for them to be proud of. They held to far higher standards, they believed, than did the Sadducees. They *loved* the traditions of the elders. They were the scholarly class. They studied and poked and prodded at the Laws of Moses to try to stipulate *exactly* what kind of behavior was appropriate. Their pride came from a rigid obedience to the letters of the statutes they had adopted as the only way to live. *They* were the elites. *They* were the proud. They were the Pharisees. To help 21<sup>st</sup> Century people understand their attitudes, they were like Christian sects of today who look down their noses at so-called “regular” Christians, because they tie another moniker on themselves of being some superior breed of Christian they call “born again” Christians.

“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? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruits in keeping

with repentance!” (Luke 3:7-8, EHV). Did the Pharisees look smugly at the Sadducees and think, “those are the sons of snakes he is talking about”? Maybe the Sadducees smugly looked back at the Pharisees thinking the sons of snakes were clearly the Pharisees.

John went on. “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” (Luke 3:8, EHV). The whole crowd was made up of Jews! All of them were proud of one thing in particular—they could trace their ancestry to Abraham.

“The crowds began to ask him, ‘What should we do then?’... <sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also...said, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’...<sup>14</sup>Soldiers were also asking him, ‘And what should we do?’” (Luke 3:10, 12, 14, EHV). All of a sudden the whole crowd understood. “He’s talking about *us*, too. He doesn’t just mean these religious elites, but *all* of us. He’s calling us ‘sons of snakes.’”

The people had all fallen into the sins of their fathers—the sins that had run rampant throughout Judaism for the history of their country. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance!” (Luke 3:7-8, EHV). All the self-righteousness in keeping the law; all the special observances of religious festival days; all the adherence to rules for Sabbath Days; all the keeping of the whole Ceremonial Law—all of it was just a bunch of posturing.

All they were doing was just a false attempt to flee from the coming wrath. Their sense of joy came from a false narrative. They all felt that what they were able to accomplish led to joy.

## II.

Do *you* have a false sense of joy? Are you a Sadducee—one of the religious aristocracy? Do you follow only the “pure” religion and look down your nose at the commoners? Or are you perhaps a Pharisee, and see yourself as one of the super-Christians rather than just “regular” Christians? Maybe you have known that the name Martin Luther was taken by the civil rights leader’s father because he admired his courage in sticking to his theological guns and never backing down from the religious elites of his day. Your family has been Lutheran for generations—you have Lutheranism as your birthright.

“I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup>Even 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” (Luke 3:8-9, EHV).

Do what the Baptizer said to do—picture your life as if you were a tree. How healthy does your tree look? Are you filled with spring-time leaves and buds just bursting with the idea of fruit that is soon to ripen and produce? Are you a healthy summer tree, loaded with fruit—the fruits of your faith just in constant evidence? Or does your spiritual life look more like the season of the year we are in right now—branches looking barren and lifeless?

The ax is ready to strike at the root of the trees, says John.

“The crowds began to ask him, ‘What should we do then?’” (Luke 3:10, EHV).

John describes the fruit the crowds ought to produce. “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same...<sup>13</sup> Collect no more than what you were authorized to...<sup>14</sup> Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages” (Luke 3:11, 13, 14, EHV). The problem is, people always fall short. Often when we act charitably to others it is an attempt to make ourselves look good. We take only what we’re authorized to take and we don’t extort from others *not* out of any sense of morality, but because we fear getting caught.

## III.

Look now at Jesus' tree. *That* tree is majestic! It is so heavy with fruit the boughs all bend toward the earth. There is never a winter moment for the Jesus tree—it is *always* fruitful. Jesus is perfect. Jesus is righteous. Jesus is holy. Jesus is the fruit God wants us to be.

“Even 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” (Luke 3:9, EHV). When the Heavenly Father looked at our bare branches with no fruit, and picked up his ax and walked determinedly toward us, Jesus said: “No, Father! Don't cut them down! Cut *me* down instead!”

The big, beautiful, fruit-laden tree got the ax. God the Father cut down the Lord Jesus—the perfect tree, the righteous and holy branch. Jesus was cast off to the fires of hell by a righteous God to pay for the fruitlessness of his people.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4, EHV) says Paul in today's Second Lesson.

“Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem. <sup>15</sup>The LORD has removed the judgment against you” (Zephaniah 3:14, EHV) Zephaniah said in the First Lesson. That's exactly what happened when the Heavenly Father listened to our Lord Jesus and took his life instead of ours. Jesus became our substitute. Our unreasoning pride and smugness in Christianity were all paid by the Savior on the cross. The Lord has taken away the punishment we deserve.

That, above all else, is the reason for our joy in Advent and Christmas. God wanted *you*. God chose *you*. God was willing to pay *anything* so that *you* could spend eternity with him in heaven. *That* brings unmitigated joy.

#### IV.

It is in *that* light that we take a closer look at what John the Baptist instructed his listeners. “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same...<sup>13</sup> Collect no more than what you were authorized to...<sup>14</sup> Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages” (Luke 3:11, 13, 14, EHV).

We don't do it to look good. We don't follow John's advise because we are afraid of getting caught. We don't even do it out of a sense of morality that thinks we might be able to satisfy the Great and Powerful God.

We do these things to *reflect* Jesus. Jesus said: “I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, EHV). We do these things because we are grafted in to Jesus. *He* is the real source of the fruit we bear. He is the Savior. He is the Redeemer. He is our Joy.

“Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance!” (Luke 3:8, EHV). Repentance means a change of mind. Advent is a penitential season. It is a season in which we repent—change our mind. We focus on God and what he has done for us in sending us the gifts we receive in the birth of our Savior. Some think repentance is connected with sorrow. John teaches us that it leads to a deep joy—the joy that comes from knowing how much the Heavenly Father loved us in sending his Son to this earth to be our Savior; and the joy that comes from knowing how much Jesus, our Savior, loves us, too; and finally the joy that comes in knowing what awaits us in the joy that will have no end when we see the Savior face-to-face.

God grant you great joy as you prepare to meet your King. Amen.