

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, ²“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” ³Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

⁴John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. ⁶They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! ⁹Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Repent

I.

They have been used for hundreds, even thousands of years to decorate. Even pagan cultures used them. In the depths of winter, when almost everything is dark and barren, people just wanted a little color to spruce things up. Evergreen branches have been used for decoration for many, many years. The Romans used them to decorate their temples at winter festivals of their gods.

Many Christians dismissed the evergreen as something that could not be used in Christianity, since they believed it had been attached to pagan beliefs. Legend has it that a certain man was walking through the forest at night before Christmas and looked up to see stars shining through the tree branches. It was so beautiful that he went home and told his children that it reminded him of Jesus, who left the stars of heaven to come to earth at Christmas (<https://tinyurl.com/y8x4we94>). That man is said to be the one who first put candles on a Christmas tree to remind him of the light of the stars and the light of the world who left his home in the stars to come to earth for us. The man’s name, naturally, is Martin Luther.

The tradition was slow to get going in North America, however, since there were so many Puritans who insisted the custom was too ingrained in pagan rituals to use it. As Irish and German immigrants flooded into America, they brought the tradition with them and defied Puritan regulations. A picture of England’s Queen Victoria in 1848 finally helped the tradition catch on in America.

I wonder if Luther would have embraced the kind of tree my family puts up—the one where the lights are all pre-fixed to the tree. Just slap a couple of sections together and fluff it up and turn it on. Viola! The Christmas tree is ready.

Other people insist on the fresh smell and the tradition of going out to find just the right tree. Once you find the one you like, you have it all smashed up and bound together in one of those tree nets, you tie that thing to the roof rack of your little SUV and drive home with bits of tree branch dangling in front of the windshield.

Whether your tree is real or artificial, after you set it up you have to rummage around in the

attic or the basement looking for all the boxes of decorations. You drag them out and put them on the tree. Perhaps some are heirlooms, handed down for generations in your family. Others are precious because your children made them. At the base of the tree the presents will be placed until the family gathers together at just the right time to open them.

II.

Some of you who know me well will be saying that it is too early in the season of Advent to be talking about Christmas trees. Yet trees are a part of our Advent preparation, just as they are part of Christmas itself. John the Baptist says in today's Gospel: "Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10, EHV).

Trees that did not produce good fruit were going to get the ax, John said. How did he get to that point? What made John talk about chopping down trees?

The Gospel for today spoke about John preaching in the wilderness. His message was: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matthew 3:2, EHV). The message struck a chord. People realized, deep down, that something was wrong with their spiritual condition. They went to find out more. "Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. "They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins" (Matthew 3:5-6, EHV).

Many who came, if not most, were sincere. But among the throngs who came were also some critics who just came to criticize and find fault—the Pharisees and Sadducees. John could read them like an open book. "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? "Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! "Do not think of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:7-9, EHV).

These people were part of the Jewish people. That made them part of the chosen family of God. So they believed. It was their lineage. It was their birthright. *They* were of the family of God. By birth. Nothing could change that.

Sons of snakes, John called them. Harsh. So much of our attention at this time of year is on family. He told them their long history of being of the family of Abraham had nothing to do with them being in the family of God. They were not going to escape the wrath of God just because of their lineage.

My previous congregation was established in 1885. Zion had been in existence for over 100 years when I was installed as one of the pastors. Sometimes some people got the notion that they had a right to be members of that congregation just because Grandpa or Grandma had been members for so long, or that their relatives had been among those who established the church all those many years before.

Lineage doesn't get you to heaven. Just because your great-great-grandfather was a Christian doesn't mean that *you* will be thought of highly by God. "Do not think of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Repent. Do not think that your relatives of the past will be your calling card at the gates of heaven. "Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance!"

Repentance begins with three simple words: "I am sorry." When we do something wrong we would rather yell, scream, and argue than telling God or that person: "I am sorry." The people coming out to the Jordan to be baptized by John were showing the fruits of their repentance. They were sorry over their sins and wanted to do something about it.

III.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will

gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11-12, EHV).

Jesus was the One John the Baptist was pointing to. The fire with which he judges is and will be unquenchable. But his coming is not simply to execute wrath and judgment. Abraham’s descendants have failed. Christ will make new descendants of Abraham, baptizing them with the Holy Spirit.

In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah said: “A shoot will spring up from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1, EHV). John told us in the sermon text that the ax is at the root of the trees. Israel and Judah were already stumps of their former selves. The line of David, who came from Jesse, had not been ruling in the land for centuries. Yet, the shoot had already sprung to life from the stump of Jesse. The Branch was about to bear fruit.

Jesus is that shoot and branch. Jesus did *not* sin. Jesus came to do what none of us have ever been able to do—live without doing even one thing wrong...ever. The Branch of Jesus’ righteousness bore fruit—he gave his perfect life as the sacrifice for each of us, all of whom have failed to be perfect as God requires.

The fruit Jesus gave us is the gospel—he won the forgiveness we needed on the cross, and he gives us the message of forgiveness to this day in his Word. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, believers have the privilege of tasting and seeing the forgiveness he brought.

IV.

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 3:11, EHV). Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers. The Holy Spirit works faith in the heart—faith which trusts in what God promised and carried out for us. He works in simple ways—baptism creates faith in the heart.

You have been given faith. Live in that faith. John went on: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11, EHV). What did John mean that Jesus would baptize with fire? It is possible that he was looking ahead to Pentecost and the tongues of fire that rested on the Apostles. He might have been referring to the metaphor of cleansing in the lives of believers. But John went on to talk about the winnowing shovel and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Speaking of a baptism of fire, John might have been alluding to judgment that comes to those who reject Jesus.

The warning is there for those who would turn their backs on Jesus. We are to live in the baptismal grace we have already received. Keep on learning and growing in your understanding of what your Lord Jesus has done for you. Do not let it stagnate. Do not turn your back on it.

Advent is a time to get back to spiritual basics. Reflecting on your baptism and living in the daily repentance baptism is to remind us of is a spiritual foundation of our lives.

“Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance!” (Matthew 3:8, EHV). We cannot do this by nature. By nature, every individual is steeped in sin. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We cannot produce it alone, but the Holy Spirit can and will produce such fruit in and through us.

As you admire your Christmas tree this year, let it remind you of the Light of the World who came to pay for your sins. Let it remind you of the fruit Jesus bore for you by dying on another tree—the tree of the cross. Use it as a reminder of the fruits *you* continue to bear in response to and as a reflection of the Light of the World in your life.

God bless your Advent and Christmas reflections and worship of your Savior and King. Amen.