

**First Sunday of Advent – December 4, 2016**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Matthew 3:1-12 (NIV)**  
Second Sunday in Advent Series A

**In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2) and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3) This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' " 4) John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5) People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6) Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 7) But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8) Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9) And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10) 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. 11) "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

Dear Friends in Christ:

How is your Christmas shopping going? You got the kids or grandkids some toys and some clothes. Maybe you got the teenagers in your life some gift cards to their favorite shops—perhaps some cool little electronics. The adults on your list are hard to buy for. Maybe you're even putting them off, but you have some ideas.

So, what are you going to get God? You'll put a little money in the plate. You'll make sure your kids know their recitations and songs for the Christmas Eve service and get them here for the service. You'll make sure you're in your pew when you're supposed to be this season and promise not to let commercialism get the better of you, right?

But did you ask him what he wants? Did you check out his list? John the Baptizer didn't know anything about Christmas trees or blinking lights or hitting the sales just right, but you better believe he knew God's Christmas list. And what did he tell us God wants?

According to John, **God Wants Fruit for Christmas**. What kind of fruit? Well, that's the thing. **1. It costs more than sinners by nature can give, but 2. God produces it freely among his people.**

Specifically, we're talking about the fruit of repentance, and repentance is a complete and total change of mind, a whole different way of thinking.

John's very different way of life illustrated this. "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." This was not normal dress. It was the garb of Old Testament prophets (2 Kings 1:8). It set him apart from the crowd as different.

Likewise, his ministry out in the desert marked a great change from the norm—and a hearkening to the Word of God. It would remind the Israelites of their forefathers, who wandered in the desert for forty years under God’s care until God settled them in the Promised Land. The wilderness would also take his listeners out of the hustle and bustle of daily life, filled with distractions and excuses for not considering God’s Word.

Even John’s diet revealed a complete turning toward God. He could have found better food than locusts and wild honey, but what he ate was not important to him. He would take whatever the Lord provided for him right out there in the wild.

Like repentance, it was a complete change from the norm and a total dependence upon God. We are told that when Isaiah saw John the Baptizer in prophetic foresight, he described him as **“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”** Everything about him cried out that the Messiah was approaching. His whole life was a message of preparing, improving the way to hearts by getting rid of obstacles like selfishness and lust and pride.

When you have special company coming over for the holidays, don’t you think about how you can make your home more welcoming? You get the toys out of the way. You clean up the floors. You put out the guest towels. You think about what meals your visitors might like and get all the necessary supplies.

But that’s people. How do you get ready for God to come over? He doesn’t care about your house; he needs no place to sleep or eat. And what does he care about your ornaments and your lights and your Christmas turkey? Listen as he speaks through the prophet Amos: **“I hate, I despise your religious festivals.... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24) But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”** (Amos 5:21-24)!

All God wants to find under your Christmas tree is a heart dedicated to righteousness and fairness in all things, a heart that loves the good he loves and hates the wrong he hates. Can he find such a thing this season, or do his high demands meet with short supply?

The Pharisees and Sadducees of John’s day seemed to feel that fulfilling such Christmas wishes for God was a simple matter. They were men who studied the Word of God and wrapped up their lives in shiny acts of obedience, believing that God would be delighted with their careful packaging and their finishing touches. But what would God find inside their gift-wrapped hearts? John the Baptist called a spade a spade when he spoke to them.

**“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8) Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** They considered a look deep inside the depths of their hearts’ darkest recesses unnecessary. They figured that if they could be happy with their outward acts, God should be, too. Besides, they figured, they were “good blood,” descended from Abraham—God’s kind of people!

But, John told them, **“do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ 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.”**

The Pharisees and Sadducees heard from John that God is... how shall I put it? He’s “hard to buy for.” But it’s not because we can never know what he wants. That he has made clear: **“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy”** (Leviticus 19:2). The problem is that we can never offer this gift. We simply don’t have it. The Pharisees put more zeal into producing righteous fruit than you and I ever have, but it wasn’t enough for

them as Jesus explained in (Matthew 5:20). **For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

We may live pretty well, but we think thoughts that our God cannot stand! The Lord Jesus exposes the evil of our hearts as he declares (Mark 7:21-22 NIV) **For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come--sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22) adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.**

Our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to give to God any gifts which are pleasing and acceptable in his sight by ourselves. Thankfully Christmas is much more about his gift to us than it is about our gifts to him.

In the same way, John's preaching, for as harsh as it sounded, was much more about God giving than it was about God demanding. "Repent!" is certainly a demand to recognize one's sin. But what was the other part of his message? **"The kingdom of heaven is near."** How many thousands of years had the faithful of Israel been waiting to hear those words?

Literally, what John was saying to them was that the kingdom of heaven had already approached, that it was right on the doorstep, on the way in! This Good News was producing in people the complete change of heart that is impossible for us to produce by nature. The bad news about sin John was preaching merely helped the Good News to shine all the brighter.

Indeed, the harsh words John offered the Pharisees and Sadducees were the nicest things he could have said. They were in trouble if they felt that they had already offered the coming Christ Child everything his little heart could desire. Because of this, they would be unprepared for his coming. They would separate themselves from him with their pride. His powers would alienate them. His pure truth could ultimately drive them away.

So it was love speaking truth that led John to say, **"But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** John desired for them to throw away their gift-wrapped pride before it was too late!

Think of it this way: If I were to tell you that Jesus was coming here for a personal visit, in the flesh, and we had a week to get ready, would that be good news or bad news? Technically, "repent" and "prepare" are still demands, but wouldn't you be joyful to get ready in whatever way was appropriate?

Admitting your sins is demanding, just like many of the services we are privileged to perform for our Savior around church are demanding, but what a joy to do it all for the One who comes to us as a brother!

John was doing the same thing in his day: simply announcing the news. And, by God's power and grace, that news was effecting in people's hearts a change that produced fruit in accord with God's desires. **"People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."** They were confessing, approaching God with true hearts, and they were being baptized.

John was using the most powerful tools in all the universe to prepare hearts for Jesus' ministry. He was using the gospel, the good news of God's salvation, in both word (his preaching) and sacrament (baptism). And it

was working! The fruit God wants was coming forth. Many of Jesus' own disciples came from John's following in the wilderness, and countless other souls were brought to faith.

And that's the really big thing because **without faith it is impossible to please God.** (Hebrews 11:6 NIV) None of the honest fruit that God desires can come from a heart that does not first have this most precious gift: faith. That's because we're not talking about simply believing some vague notion that there's some God out there somewhere. We're talking about saving faith, the spiritual gift from God that brings the benefits of Jesus' life, death and resurrection to us.

The hearts we are born with are not what God demands them to be; neither do they produce the fruit he desires. By nature, we are of a very different stock: that "brood of vipers" which God in his holiness cannot tolerate. We have nothing by nature to offer him.

God was true to his Word and sent his Son into this world who won forgiveness for our sins and life eternal in heaven. That good news gives us a new heart bearing good fruit, a pleasing gift to offer our Lord this Christmas. Amen.