

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying,

"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Oh, John the Baptist. On the count of three, everybody say, “Oh, John the Baptist”. Bless his heart.

We’ve heard of John the Baptist...

There’s no reason to think that John the Baptist was a father, given the life that he chose to live in the wilderness. But, there’s a good chance he could have been an uncle. Uncle John.

There are a few different kinds of uncles. There’s the uncle who lives in a converted school bus and drives around to all the national parks, working in small towns along the way, and who sends you handmade pottery. He actually comes around a lot and even stays awhile in the summers because you have reliable air conditioning, but it’s okay because he’s cool and plays the ukulele.

Then there’s the uncle who works on Wall Street. You see him less but he pays your school tuition and lets you come and visit him in the city during which time he nods approvingly when you gripe about your parents.

And then there’s Uncle John the Baptist, whom you’ve never met. He’s sort of, well, different than the rest of the family. People like him, it’s just that he’s kind of... well, *severe*. Just, the way he says things. And when he says them. He never gets any retweets or even likes because people are just put off by what he says.

I mean, in a few verses, John calls out Herod for his marriage shenanigans. He was just that kind of guy.

Imagine the whole family is gathering for an early Christmas party. Everybody arrives, the first two uncles, their families, and all your cousins and grandparents. There are Christmas greetings, music, the log is burning and the nog is flowing when suddenly Uncle John bursts through the door screaming that you’re all a brood of vipers! Repent, every one of you!

That would be crazy at a family Christmas party, but maybe not all that shocking since you kind of know what to expect from John. The people who came to hear John preach in our story would not have expected his outlandish message. At all.

Plus, look at who was in the crowd. These weren't cousins and their plus-ones. These were country folk, tax collectors, and Roman soldiers. It would be like Philadelphia parking meter enforcers knocked on the door to join you followed by a handful of your unrepentant childhood bullies. Just a crowd of knuckleheads and rabble rousers.

What a scene.

Whether we imagine ourselves sitting by the fire or sitting right here in the pew, John's message is timely for us just like it was for the crowd that had gathered. And, the question isn't are we a soldier or a tax collector. The question is, are we willing to hear John's message as words for us to live by even in the midst of Advent, when that message isn't even *close* to what we hear on our Christmas music playlists?

I'm not sure the word "repent" occurs in any of our holiday canon of hymnody, but John's message is exactly what we need to hear whether we want to or not.

God's inbreaking into human history disrupts *a lot* of what we want. The Messiah that John has come to announce would go on to proclaim a message that was even more shocking than John's, to an even more diverse and unseemly crowd. John *spoke* with tax collectors, soldiers, and sinners; Jesus ate with them.

That's often how the gospel works. It tugs at our privileged sensibilities. It pokes at our preference for comfort and joy, while inviting us to the stables and into deeper communion with God.

And so as we listen for the gospel in this Luke passage today, let us not shy away from the difficult or the uncomfortable, and that includes the unpopular subject of repentance.

So, what does John actually say?

In some ways, John's message in our passage is straightforward. Moving through the verses, what he says is pretty simple:

Say sorry and mean it  
Demonstrate that you are sorry  
Here is how you demonstrate that you are sorry  
If you can't demonstrate that you are sorry, when the Messiah comes, he  
will "help you" with that

Even in its simplicity, there are two pieces of this lesson that I want to highlight for us today. That's right, only two. I'm rebelling against the Presbyterian mandate of the Triune Sermon Illustration. We're only doing two!

The first thing is that John's message of repentance is both general and specific. He covers his bases, speaking to the whole crowd and then to some individuals. We can't escape the call to repentance, whether we are a tax collector, soldier, or just some face in the crowd.

He announces to everyone that nobody can claim salvation or even forgiveness on account of our ancestors, and that everybody must properly repent for our sins. But then he also takes the time to respond individually to attendees in specific fields and roles in society. If you're a tax collector, don't steal. If you're a soldier, don't intimidate and oppress.

We must be honest with ourselves about what John would say to each of us, according to our personal circumstances, and in this day and age. What would he say to us?

I guess I'll take a stab at it:

If you're wealthy, don't hoard your resources.  
If you're educated, teach others.  
If you're white, work for racial justice in the world around you.  
If you're male, don't ignore the space you take up just by being in the room.

And yes, these messages are for us *right now*, two weeks before Christmas, in the midst of holiday parties and songs about mistletoe. The changes can't wait:

If you have any food, share some with those who are hungry.  
If you are of sound mind, pray for those who are not and treat all people with kindness.  
If you are capable, lift up those who have been pushed down.  
If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none.

We are in the crowd. We are at the Christmas party when John bursts through the door. Where does our repentance need to come from?

The second piece I want to address is the timing of this passage in the lectionary. John's message of repentance is jarring enough. We wouldn't necessarily want to hear it on any day or month. But why do we need to listen to it *now*?

Yes, now is the time. Now is the time because in order for us to journey toward Christmas we must be facing the right way.

In order for us to hear the choirs of angels, we must be oriented properly.  
In order for us to see the guiding star of Bethlehem, we must be looking in the right direction.

You see, the word *repent* doesn't just mean "to be sorry". Being sorry is something that we do inside our head. It doesn't matter what we do or say on the outside, we can feel sorry on the inside and it wouldn't matter to those we have hurt.

I can say *sorry* as I am walking away from you.

"To repent" means to alter our direction, to change one's position, to reorient one's life. It is a demonstrable change so that instead of facing one way, we turn to walk another way.

Allow me to demonstrate:

On our journey through Advent, we want to be facing forward, walking toward Bethlehem, eyes on the coming Light with hearts open.

But if I turn to the side, my message becomes more difficult to hear and understand. I can't see as clearly. My voice is harder to discern.

The more I turn away, the harder it is for me to be fully present. I can still say the words "I'm sorry" but my body is saying something else.

And if I'm not careful, I continue to turn myself away from those I love, all the while "apologizing" with my words.

John invites us to turn our bodies, to change direction, to reorient ourselves back toward the lighted path, which is pointing toward the Messiah. *Repentance* is much more than just saying sorry. This is why I believe John's message is so important for us to hear even now in this season of Advent, in this season of gatherings. If we want to fully embody the joy of Christmas, then let us change direction with our bodies, as well as with our words.

John the Baptist, what a weird guy with an unpopular message. While we're trying to gather for the holidays and enjoy each other's company, Uncle John comes barging in calling us vipers and demanding that we repent. Do we really have to listen to him?

I highly recommend it. After all, Luke calls John's message of repentance, "the gospel".

It's true! The last verse of our passage, verse 18, says, "With many other exhortations, John proclaimed the *good news* to the people." That word "good news" is the word gospel.

Sisters and brothers, hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ, which is that the prophet John prepared the way for the birth of the Messiah by calling all of us to *repent* and reorient our bodies toward the direction that the star was leading so long ago.

The Good News of Jesus Christ, is that he was born in a manger for us and our salvation. Let us proclaim the good news while facing in the right direction.

Amen.