

Sermon Advent 2 2018

December 9, 2018

Luke 3:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

I am always struck by something in this lesson. I am struck by the words where Luke says of John, **“So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”** Do you see what’s odd to me? Maybe Luke is saying that John said other things were good news, but it sounds like he’s saying that, just like John preached here, he preached elsewhere. And what did he preach? Good news. Good news? Did you hear the reading? That doesn’t sound like good news? Think about it. Does John the Baptist’s preaching sound like good news to you?

Listen: **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

Calling people brood of vipers? Implying that they are the trees that are not bearing good fruit? And what does he say will happen to those trees? The axe is already at their root, waiting to cut them down that they may be thrown into the fire.

That doesn’t sound like good news does it? After all, what is he describing? He’s describing the wrath of God and punishment in hell. That’s not good news at all. So why can Luke say that this is good news? Well look at how John is described, **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”** Here is John and he is that one preparing the way of the Lord. He’s that one proclaiming the filling of the valleys and the making low of the mountains; the straightening of the crooked places and the leveling of the rough spots. And to what end? That **“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

Well the salvation of God starts to sound like good news, but the why the fire and the brimstone? Last week, I was listening the Christmas Carol, and I realized how

well it fit. I'm sure you all know that story of Ebenezer Scrooge. I realized that I had seen the movie and multiple adaptations, but had never read it. Unfortunately, my time is limited for reading right now, so I downloaded the audiobook and listened in the car. And as I listened something was impressed upon me that I had thought about before, but not as in depth as while I was hearing the book. What's that?

Well, as you listen to the story, you might remember that in the midst of the visits from the ghosts, Scrooge begins to proclaim that his life is changed already well before the visits are done. He starts to tell the Ghost of Christmas Present in particular that he wants to and will do better. The Ghost shows him the plight of the Cratchits and Tiny Tim, and Scrooge is struck. He wants to help more and listen more. Scrooge is cut to the heart all the more when the Ghost reminds him of his own words that the poor have poor houses and work houses and so don't need charity. In fact they could even die and "reduce the surplus population." Yes as this happens Scrooge sees just how calloused he is and has treated others. So, why doesn't the voyage end there? Why doesn't Scrooge wake up at that point ready to live his new life? Because the real lesson hasn't been had yet. The real portion that will codify the change hasn't been experienced.

What does old Ebenezer still require? Well, think about what it is that the Ghost of Christmas Future shows him. On the one hand he shows Scrooge Tiny Tim's death, and that's extremely saddening and affects him. But what is the most striking thing? It's his own death. He alludes to how he understands that this man the people are talking about could be how his death is received if he doesn't change. He knows this is serious, but just how serious this is isn't clear until there is his grave: Ebenezer Scrooge. Then it all hits home. Yes we keep thinking we'll do better tomorrow, we keep thinking that there are serious things, we might even fret at the thought of God, but that's not now. But seeing his gravestone, that not now became now for Ebenezer. Struck by that, he was finally broken.

That's what John is doing. The name calling, the attack at these brood of vipers, the axe at the root of the tree is all to bring this home. To what end? Repentance; "a **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,**" that call, "**Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.**" He's telling them to repent. And his words are recorded for you for the same reason. You need to recall the nearness of your mortality. You don't know when it will be. You can't trust that you'll have more days to do better. Will you have more days? Well of course the law of averages tells you that there's plenty

of time—although the older we get the more immanent we have to understand that to be. But experience says that won't be yet. But if we look around and look at what happens, we have to see the urgency here. Why? Because experience tells us also that there is absolutely no guarantee that there will be tomorrow for us.

So what are you to do? Repent. Look at John's call. Give to those in need. Share your tunics, your clothes with those how have none. Give your food to those who are hungering. Do this and do it without measure of your generosity. And after you have that come back and give more. And after you do that realize that you are still greedy and clinging to things for yourself. And when you hit that point, you can see what John's preaching has done. Then you can see how the mountain has been made low, how the path has been made straight. And what mountain, what path is that?

It's that path by which the Lord comes to you. You see when you still think you can do something, when you still think you have plenty of time, when you still think that this is confrontation with God isn't immediate—in John's words, when you don't think the axe is laid at the root, you think you can still skate by avoiding the lack of righteousness that dwells in your heart. You think you can go more days trusting "not being that bad," in "not having killed anyone," as we like to say in our day. You think can continue trusting in that. But when you see the clear picture, when you see the grave with your name on it: Matthew Zickler. Suddenly, you have no hope. Suddenly, the only hope that you have is mercy.

And that's whose way John was preparing: the Lord of that mercy. Now John describes the glory of this one by saying this, **"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. 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 barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."** He is preparing the way for the One who is greater than He, the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire at that first Pentecost, and now continues to do so through the Church. And as He does that what happens?

Well, on the one hand we have to understand these words in the context of what's been said, we have to understand that Jesus is the One who will come bringing judgment at the end. We have to hear that Jesus truly is the One who will finally separate the sheep of His Church from the goats of the world. We have to hear that

and understand that we absolutely want to be with the wheat gathered into His barn and not with the chaff burned in the fire.

However, we can also think of this in a way that comforts us. As we have reached this point of despairing of ourselves, of realizing that we have no hope outside of mercy, we can realize that this One coming after John comes to us and brings His Holy Spirit and Fire to us. In other words, when you were baptized with water and the Word, the Holy Spirit and His fire came to you. And what did that do? Did it make you passionate for Jesus? Did it make you fiery and “spiritual” like we think of it in the world? Not necessarily. What those waters did, though were to bring that Spirit and that fire to your chaff. They brought the judgment of Jesus to you, and carried your chaff away so that you are now that seed prepared for the barn.

In the Old Testament Lesson, we heard of how Malachi speaks of the Lord saying, **“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.”** You can understand soap; it cleanses. And a refiner. My understanding is that fire is added to the metal and as it gets hotter it removes more and more impurities such that finally all that is left is the pure unadulterated metal.

So how does Jesus do this work, then? In that baptism He washes away the impurity of your sin by that water with the Word, and He purifies you by giving you His righteousness. In other words in that font He exchanged your sin for His righteousness. He took your sin from you, put it upon Himself and carried it to the fire of the cross, where He was judged for it. He took your chaff to the fire, that He could give you the life of the grain of wheat resurrected; that He could give you His goodness, His perfection, His righteousness.

So when John preaches Jesus, when He makes the path straight for Him, do you see the good news? Do you see that salvation, once the path is clear? The salvation is beautiful, isn’t it? It’s the most pressing, most glorious thing that there is: the bad tree was spared for the Good One; the Christ coming into the world went to the grave for you. Because of that your grave will have your name on it, but the body resting in the will not always. It will raise in the resurrection of this One whose sandal John was worthy to untie. It will raise and live in that salvation forever. And that is good news. Amen.