

Luke 3:7-18

About the last thing a text like this does is to put us into the “Christmas spirit.” Eight days to go and we’re thinking about finishing our baking, doing our last-minute shopping, and wrapping up our presents. We take time out of our hectic schedules to come to church and some Old Testament prophet who smells like the desert, and looks like it too, greets us with the words: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

But as far back as we can remember it has always been this way. The weeks before Christmas, known as Advent in the Church, is that time of the year when John the Baptist opens his mouth from the pages of the Scriptures. And what he has to say isn’t pretty. He doesn’t speak of tinsel and decorations, of gifts and Santa Claus; he speaks of fire and God’s anger, of chopping away with an ax—he speaks of repentance. Which is one reason, I suppose, why church pews do not fill up until after John is long gone. People don’t want to hear about repentance and the wrath of God. They want to hear about babies, and mangers, and peace on earth. They want to hear from the angel in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, not from John the Baptist crying out from the Jordan River.

And yet, Christmas has no meaning apart from Advent. God did not just send His Son into the world; He first prepared His way. John came before Jesus. Words of repentance come before the Absolution. Preparation comes before Holy Communion. Before the Gospel comes the Law. John must come before Jesus or we will not be ready for the Savior to come.

There is no such thing as “pain-free” and “blood-free” heart surgery. If we’re going to have the surgeon repair our heart, he first needs to use his scalpel. John is God’s scalpel...and if Christ’s coming on Christmas is going to have meaning for us and bring us His healing grace, we first need to have John cut away at our sinful flesh. And one thing is sure—John knows how to use a scalpel. His words sting. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!” Don’t just say you’re sorry for your sins—repent! To repent is more than warming a pew on Sunday mornings. It’s more than telling God what He wants to hear. Repentance means to have a change of mind. It means to turn around—to stop going the direction we’re going and start going the other way.

If I’m filling my mind with sexual images from looking at screens and magazines, repentance is not just saying, “Oh, I’m sorry about that.” Repentance is turning away from it and going the other direction. If I use my mouth to speak bad words about my neighbor, to repent is not just saying, “sorry.” To repent is to stop doing it. To repent means to forsake my habit of leaving my Bible unopened on my shelf. To repent means to give up whatever it is that keeps me away from God’s House on Sunday mornings. It means to stop talking back to parents and teachers and to show respect for authority.

It hurts, doesn’t it? It hurt when John spoke this way to the people of Judea, and it hurts when those same words reach our ears today. We honestly don’t want to change. We hate to change. It hurts to change, especially when it involves changing our sinful ways. And something else we hate is admitting that we’re wrong. If I stop doing what I’ve been doing, then I’m admitting that I’ve been wrong the whole time.

In other words, you and I hate to repent. Oh, we don't mind confessing our sins with the congregation, but when we walk out that door we go right back to our sinful habits. But that doesn't work with God. He is telling us through His prophet, John the Baptist, that you and I are wrong. We're heading in the wrong direction. Our minds have the wrong kind of thinking. Our hearts and lives are just plain wrong, and if we don't turn away from our "wrongness" we're heading for the ax. "Every tree," he says, "that does not produce fruits of repentance will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Have you ever heard of a man who is driving his car in the wrong direction, and even though he knows it, he won't turn around because he refuses to admit to his wife that he is wrong? That's us. We're wrong and we refuse to admit it or do anything about it. And so what is God to do with us? We're heading for the eternal fires because we just won't repent of our sinful ways. We're heading for the ax because we simply won't produce fruits of repentance in our life. God warns us through His prophet, but we keep heading in the wrong direction.

Friend, listen to this good news. Here is what your God does: He becomes wrong for you. He comes into our world filled with wrongs, and He Himself takes our wrongs, suffering wrongfully under King Herod and Pontius Pilate. He is wronged, but He utters no defense. He doesn't lash out when they strike Him. He doesn't raise a hand to ward off the blows that are wrongfully given.

Jesus was wronged for you because He became what is wrong with you. He didn't just come into our world—He comes to you, and He comes to be wrong in your place. Because you and I refuse to admit that we're wrong, Jesus admits it for us. "I'm wrong," He cries, "Punish Me instead." And they do, and His Father does. And Jesus suffers every wrong that our sins have caused.

Jesus becomes full of lust for you. Jesus becomes disobedient to authority for you. He, the sinless One, becomes stubborn and bull-headed. He becomes spiritually lazy. And because Jesus became wrong for you, that makes you right in God's eyes. You will not feel His anger. God declares you right and holy because Jesus was punished for you. Jesus was cut down with the ax. His tree on Calvary became barren and God wielded His ax against His own Son. You, therefore, need have no fear of the ax. God will not use it on you for it is already covered with the blood of Christ for you. And you need have no fear of the eternal fires of God's wrath. Jesus was consumed by those fires in your place. In the waters of your baptism Jesus keeps you safe from the fire. The fires of God's anger are always put out by those baptismal waters which Jesus pours over you.

This is God's good news for you. Are we wrong? Yes. But Jesus suffered your wrongs. You are forgiven. Everything that is good and right about Jesus, God now sees in you, because through Holy Baptism you are in Christ. As you receive His body and blood for you, you abide in Him and He abides in you. And that's how God changes us. He puts Christ into us through His Word and Sacraments. He drowns our sinful heart and He creates a new heart within us.

Because Christ lives in you, you can turn away from those sexual images. Because He abides in you, you can speak well of your neighbor; you can delight in His Holy Word—both hearing it and reading it. Because of Christ, you and I who hate to change

have already been changed. We have a new direction to go in life—with Christ and in Christ. And we go this new way without fear, not because we have no sin, but because God forgives all your sins for Jesus' sake.

And so let Christmas come, for it truly has meaning for us—for us who believe that even though we are wrong, in Christ we are declared right. Even though the ax and fires are coming, they will not come to us who are kept safe with Christ and in Christ. We don't just flee from the coming wrath—we flee to Christ. And isn't that why you are here? You are here because in Word and Sacrament Christ is here for you. He whose birth we will soon celebrate; He who will come again, is here now to be your place of refuge. Amen.