

Had you observed him in person, you may not have liked John the Baptizer! He was not concerned with being likable. He did not try to fit in! He did not converse politely and respectfully at the student union or village library. His rough clothing was not chosen to achieve that rough manly look. His rough diet was not chosen to be organic or health conscious. His rough message showed no concern for political correctness or religious sensitivities or personal preferences.

Ah, you might think, just the man for the job – a rebel – a free thinker! That’s cool! But such thoughts would find no refuge when fire-preaching John hollered at you personally. “Turn around” from the chaff of academic arrogance and youthful experimentation that denies God’s revealed wisdom and God’s love for you in Christ. “Come back” from the immoral pull of this decaying culture headed for unquenchable fire. “Come back” from pride in your possessions and the anxious pursuit of more and more things and the idol of earthly security. Don’t think you’ll find cover in what’s acceptable to the majority. “Repent”! Repent of your doubting and your worry and your unbelieving. “Keep on bearing the good fruit of faith!”

Had you observed him in person, you may not have liked John the Baptizer. John was not a company man or a current-culture man. John was God’s Elijah-like man, His way-preparer, His voice. John was sent to holler “turn around”, “come back”. In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

John’s conception in the womb of aged Elizabeth was a miracle (Luke 1:37)! As He was being knit together in her womb, he leapt for joy at the presence of the expectant Virgin Mary (Luke 1:44). Now, three decades later he leapt forth in the wilderness because the fruit of Mary’s womb, the God/Man Jesus, stood ready to minister in the flesh. The Savior of the world was about to begin preaching and healing and feeding and driving out demons. With leather belt around his waist John announced the reign of Him whose waist-belt was righteousness.

John’s fire-preaching in the wilderness struck a nerve. The word for “repent” can mean conversion from unbelief to faith. Many who came to John were caught in the death of unbelief. Returned from exile, second temple Jerusalem was comfortable in false worship and worldly hope. John announced that Israel’s lost sheep must repent in order to be saved.

John didn’t give anyone a free pass. He didn’t preach “you’re doing alright” to anyone, including himself. When Jesus soon came to be baptized by John. John confessed that he was the one needing baptism. He did not preach “accept yourself”. He did not preach “do the best you can”. In that very first Advent season (of Christ’s coming) what he did preach was “turn around”, “come back”, “repent”. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Dear Christians, true repentance is not a good work you can produce by your own will. True repentance is not an outward religious act, even the act of receiving John's baptism. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father...'"

True repentance is a God-worked change of heart that makes a sinful heart honestly insecure in itself (God help me, I am lost). True repentance is a God-worked conviction of heart that there is absolutely nothing one can do to make it right (God help me, I cannot set myself straight). True repentance is a God-worked trust that only through God's reign in Christ is their forgiveness and hope (God be praised for judging leveled, humbled sinners with righteousness – for ruling my sinful heart with His forgiveness in Christ).

Are you honestly insecure in yourself this Advent season? Or is the chief problem out there in other people and in the world? Are you genuinely insecure in your own spirituality this morning? Earlier when you said, ""we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, and we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition" did you mean it? Do you really mean those words?

Please note that only those honestly insecure in themselves were offered John's baptism. It was refused those who thought that their religious service or their good intentions or their heritage exempted them from the wrath of God. The voice hollering in the wilderness allowed no comparisons and no cover-ups and no earthly connections. When His cry for repentance was heard, people were left alone with themselves and their desperate need - and they confessed their sins. They did what the liturgy and the catechism lead us to do all the time.

That number did not include the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were serious religious laymen known for Bible study and strenuous efforts to do the right thing. The Sadducees were sophisticated clergymen, skeptical of eternal life and yet very concerned about helping people and being relevant in their day. John's yelling got through to neither group.

Quite different in some ways, they were tragically similar in one way. Both parties believed they were doing alright spiritually. The Sadducees mixed together a little of this and a little of that in a common-sense, type of spirituality. The Pharisees wouldn't mix with much of anyone. They believed their purity and connection to Abraham was the ticket. The voice in the wilderness hollered out that both groups were a bunch of snakes headed for hell. So much for the religious leadership of that day!

Fellow-Redeemed, the voice of John the Baptizer still calls out in the wilderness of this world. As his words fall on your ears this morning, God would have them go to your heart. For your heart is no less prone to ignore the coming of the kingdom of heaven than those baptized by John.

Advent is a time of reflection, a time of cleansing, a time of renewed hope. In Advent are you recognizing the reign of heaven on earth in the person of Jesus? When you pray each day “Thy kingdom Come”, do you mean it? Or would you rather see your personal kingdom preserved and grow even at the expense of God’s kingdom? Are you confident enough in your own efforts that you feel no pressing need to receive the gifts of the risen Christ in Word and Sacrament in weekly worship?

Or, are you honestly insecure in yourself? When God grabs you by the collar and says “turn around”, “repent”, do you recognize how much you need to repent of everyday? When God says that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, do you believe that such is the future you deserve?

If so, then take heart! If you have no hope in yourself, then John’s hollering has done its God-intended work. Without hopelessness in yourself, God can’t give you Himself. But even John knew that his preaching was not God’s last word. His was the work of preparing, not providing. His was the work of warning, not winning our salvation. That work was left to the last man, the second Adam, the Word made flesh! The work of winning and providing our forgiveness was left to the one John pointed to saying “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”.

He is mightier than John! “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Beloved, there is no exemption from God’s wrath against sin, no free passes. God must punish all sin. But there is release from the wrath to come if someone bears it for you. That’s what Christ came to do in His first Advent! When the winnowing fork of God’s judgment did its work, the Son of God was cast off like chaff to be burned.

This Advent, we await this King who comes as a child. Not in fear, but in eager anticipation. Jesus crawled into this den of vipers called humanity. He was born a child. Grew as a child into manhood. Jesus took the snakebite on His hand, as the nails pierced him as would fangs. He took the deadly poison of our sin into his own body. He died because of us brood of vipers.

But He also died for us brood of vipers. Because of Jesus death and resurrection, our poisonous sin has been removed. Our need to strike out at others is gone. There are no more enemies to fight. And, as Isaiah says, “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

Your sins are forgiven by the child who took the snakebite for you. Your sins are forgiven by the man who died in your place. Your sins are forgiven by Jesus Christ. The branch of Jesse that bears the fruit of your repentance. The root of Jesse who nourishes and sustains you with the fruit of His cross.

He received the baptism with fire as your substitute, that you may receive baptism with the Holy Spirit. In that gift water was included with God's command and combined with God's Word to such astounding effect that you were baptized into the death of Christ. The fire that swept over Him on Calvary is counted by God as having swept over you. As the risen Christ gives you Himself, His belt of righteousness is now your belt of righteousness. He has borne your sin, he gives you himself and you are forgiven! You have life! It is yours! He has done the wondrous works, and he comes to you today, you are forgiven, salvation is yours!

Thanks be to God if you are totally insecure in yourself. Rest now in the total security, in His forgiving love for you in His beloved Son! Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he. Amen.