

“Bear Fruit In Keeping With Repentance” (Luke 3:8)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The Advent season is a season of preparation; even the worldly versions of this “Holiday Season” recognize the need for preparation. The preparations take on many forms: the shopping that must be done; the greetings whether digital, in card form, or in person should not be forgotten; big projects at work must be completed before Christmas and the new year; the parties have to be planned and attended (not only to have fun with friends, but in some cases to rub shoulders with the right people so as to take care of clientele...yes, even ambition and the “brass ring” is served during this season); the lights need to go up (esp. if you want to avoid the title of “neighborhood slouch” or “ba-hum-bug”-man); the trees trimmed, the stockings hung, and then there are other more qualitatively important types of preparations.

Some of us make it a point to receive more counseling (be it professional, support group, or self-help) for the fact that this season that is supposed to be the most cheerful is often the most difficult as we miss loved ones or when we see what is lacking in our lives in comparison to the glitter and glitz that make us terribly self-conscious about what we *don't* have. And again, the more qualitatively important preparations that include -- for the wise -- the simple and true realization that this is the season for prayer and watchfulness, because how much easier it is to get dissipated and do something foolish, harmful to ourselves, our families, and/or our neighbor or neighbors. There is nothing like the combination of stress + drink + impulsiveness to turn the season into disaster or self-destruction. We need to prepare ourselves so as to be protected from the pit-falls of a season in which the world engages not in the sacred, but in the sinful.

So yes, there are many, many preparations. These are part of the festive nature of the season; part of its beauty, but they are also part of proper preparation's dissolution and compromise if all of the preparations are only of a certain type or kind, and not in accord with THE preparation of this season which rightfully prepares for Christmas. We are called by God to properly prepare by living in repentance and -- to ensure that we are truly doing so -- to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. This is Godly preparation, true spiritual preparation; real preparation; faithful and faith-oriented preparation. This is Christian preparation; in-Christ preparation, and this is the preparation we truly need in getting ready for the coming of the Lord. Without this preparation, all of the other types resemble a hamster going round and round on one of those wheels in a cage: you'll exert all kinds of energy, but get absolutely nowhere.

OK so we all need the true preparation called repentance and its fruits, but what are these? What exactly are we talking about? “Repentance” is one of those words that we hear

about on a pretty regular basis in Church or a word we encounter when we read the Bible, but are we really clear as to its meaning?

The word is from the original word “metanoia” that means “change of mind.” Repentance is a change in the way you think; it is a change in your commitment or think of it in terms of a real change in how you live. It is also God’s work. It is not something we effect, but something God effects through the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word (that’s why John the Baptist was preaching: so that God would turn hearts and minds around 180 degrees). According to Psalm 51:5 we were sinful from the time we were conceived. And this spiritual disease means we are helpless to turn ourselves around in repentance. We need God to do this. We need HIM to turn us around in repentance. That is why we seek the Word of Christ and it is why we are in Church this morning.

When this turning...this proper preparation – takes place called “repentance” then we experience two basic things within our hearts: contrition and faith. We truly sorrow – experience deep concern for our souls – because of offending the most important One in our lives, the One who gave us life. Have you ever felt guilty for hurting someone? Then magnify that exponentially...this is the guilt and sorrow we feel for having offended the Lord. And then the other thing we know in our hearts which must follow this deep sorrow (if we experience true repentance) is faith: faith that God in Jesus forgives you. Not partially – as though you’re on probation – but totally and completely. Why? Because of God’s amazing grace; on account of His love and mercy in and through Jesus who bore your sorrows and who bore your sins. When the heart grasps this, heaven opens to us, we are born again, we have renewed hope; we are right with God and we are taken from sorrow and sadness to joy and gladness. This is repentance.

But John the Baptist in our Luke 3 Gospel text this morning was concerned that even though he was preaching the Word of God, that some stubborn hearts were resisting the Word of God; resisting God from turning their hearts in repentance. So John calls these “brood of vipers,” yes, a very harsh thing to say, but John was calling the situation for what it truly was: these who were resisting the Holy Spirit were behaving like the devil (THE snake, THE viper), rebelling against God and fighting against Him. So foolish, so insane, and yet, it is what the spirit of darkness does when Satan tries to convince some to love destruction instead of life.

So when such a concern exists – indeed the most serious of all concerns for another as to whether or not a person has true repentance – then what should follow? We need some firm foundation for spiritual recognition and discernment. And talk about opening up a can of worms at this juncture. What I’m now describing sounds like “judging” the spiritual condition of another. If that is what it sounds like, then you’re perceptive. Of course we have to be careful here. First of all, what we are *not* doing is condemning anyone. That is not our call. That is God’s call. But the very possibility of condemnation should make us very concerned about the

spiritual condition of the people around us. This should drive us to love them and to share the gospel so that they would indeed know repentance; and the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus assured to those who repent. But when Jesus says in Matthew 7:1 “do not judge” He means don’t take on God’s role. We do not say who goes to heaven or who goes to hell. God does, so in this sense don’t judge, don’t ever judge, this is not for you and it is not for me. However, this does not mean that we are not to judge the signs of danger and concern. God through St. Paul teaches at 1st Corinthians 5 that within the church, we are to judge those things that could devastate and harm our brother or sister. St. Paul writes: “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” A rhetorical question answered with: “Yes, it is for us to judge within.”

And that is what John the Baptist was doing. The people were gathered in a very churchly-context with crowds coming to be baptized (Luke 3:7). In this context, John was judging in the only way one can. He could not look into anyone’s heart, but he pointed out that which can always be judged: the fruit. Where there is repentance – sorrow for sin and joy in Jesus – there is always fruit that God produces in the life of the one with faith. It is inevitable. As the sun radiates rays of light; so the believing heart radiates good in their real life; as an apple tree produces apples, so the believing heart produces works of faith. This is axiomatic. It is absolutely true. It is what must be. There are no alternatives. So John warns those who are behaving as if they are resisting the Word, “bear fruits.” Let’s see the evidence of repentance so as to have assurance that you are saved from sin and death! Let’s see the evidence! Let’s see the signs so that you know repentance has taken place by the powerful working of God. Let’s be sure we are being properly prepared for the coming of Christ! For our own good!

From the Apology of our Lutheran Confessions (Ap XII, Triglotta 259): “In order, therefore, to deliver pious consciences from [much confusion], we have ascribed to repentance [or conversion] these two parts, namely, contrition and faith. If any one desires to add a third, namely, fruits worthy of repentance, i.e., a change of the entire life and character for the better [good works which shall and must follow conversion], we will not make any opposition.”

We go on to believe, teach, and confess (Ap VI, Triglotta 291): “We say that good fruits, good works in every kind of life, ought to follow repentance, i.e., conversion or regeneration [the renewal of the Holy Ghost in the heart]. Neither can there be true conversion or true contrition where mortifications of the flesh and good fruits do not follow [if we do not externally render good works and Christian patience]. True terrors, true griefs of mind, do not allow the body to indulge in sensual pleasures, and true faith is not ungrateful to God, neither does it despise God’s commandments. In a word, there is no inner repentance unless it also produces outwardly mortifications of the flesh. We say that this is the meaning of John when he says, Matt. 3, 8: “Bring forth, therefore, fruits for repentance.” Likewise of Paul when he says, Rom. 6, 19: “Yield your members servants to righteousness;” just as he likewise says elsewhere, Rom. 12:1: “Present your bodies a living sacrifice,” etc. And when Christ says, Matt. 4:17:

“Repent,” He certainly speaks of the entire repentance, of the entire newness of life and its fruits;”

“Likewise Chrysostom says: ‘In the heart, contrition; in the mouth, confession; in the work, entire humility.’ ...Good works ought to follow repentance; it ought to be repentance, not simulation, but a change of the entire life for the better.” (Ibid., 305)

This real change of heart and life are the “fruits” that follow repentance. These things are the work of God in your life, both the repentance and the fruits, but these fruits are not ambiguous or mystical, they are very practical, so our confession continues (Ap VI, Triglotta 305-306): “But we have already frequently testified that repentance ought to produce good fruits; and what the good fruits are the [Ten] Commandments teach, namely, [truly and from the heart most highly to esteem, fear, and love God, joyfully to call upon Him in need], prayer, thanksgiving, the confession of the Gospel [hearing the Word], to teach the Gospel, to obey parents and magistrates, to be faithful to one’s calling, not to kill, not to retain hatred, but to be forgiving [to be agreeable and kind to one’s neighbor], to give to the needy, so far as we can according to our means, not to commit fornication or adultery, but to restrain and bridle and chastise the flesh, not for a compensation of eternal punishment, but so as not to obey the devil, or offend the Holy Ghost; likewise, to speak the truth. These fruits have God’s injunction, and ought to be brought forth for the sake of God’s glory and command; and they have their rewards also.”

You see John was trying to help those who were resisting God’s work of repentance and fruit-bearing. Why is this such a big deal? Because where there is no repentance, then it must be that the only Savior from sin and death has been rejected. Talk about a reason to be concerned and this is why John warned the crowds to prepare for the coming wrath. (Luke 3:7) With Jesus Christ, God’s wrath is taken away from us; but without Jesus Christ, God’s wrath remains on us.

Fascinatingly the early church treated the need to see the fruits of repentance – our true preparation – as something very serious indeed. “Hippolytus’ Apostolic Tradition from around A.D. 215 offers an [early] witness to...prebaptismal examination... ‘And when those who are to receive baptism are chosen, let their life be examined: have they lived good lives when they were catechumens? Have they honoured the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work? And when those who brought them bear witness to each: “He has”, let them hear the gospel.’ A ‘hearer of the gospel’ was a technical term for a catechumen who, after three years of instruction, was enrolled in the final stage of catechesis before Baptism.” (Just, Concordia Commentary, Luke 1:1-9:50, 151 f.n.) This was how important the early Christians considered the fruits of repentance!

One Lutheran expositor points out: “[Repentance] is invisible; hence we judge its presence by the [fruits], which are visible [fruits]. We dare judge in no other way. We often

encounter a superficial repentance; it brings forth fruit that is different from that which is demanded by the Baptist, namely a passing regret, a few tears, perhaps, and a transient emotion, a few sighs, an excuse or two, a wish to be different, a resolve to change by one's own efforts, a brief outward betterment, and the like. The Baptist demands a repentance which is true conversion that is wrought by God himself through the very preaching of the Baptist, and is thus easily and clearly attested in the resultant life." (Lenski, 188-189)

That is to say this proclamation is not designed to try to make you try harder. If that is your impression, then we go forth wrongly. No, this is for the Word of God to do its work: to convict us of how far we have fallen short of God's standard; to cut us to the heart and to know – as part of the best preparation for this season – that we have sinned against God and have therefore hurt others and have hurt ourselves. And this – when God is working in us – causes great alarm...not just a few sighs or a few tears, but terror in our hearts knowing something is wrong (that we are wrong)...great alarm about our condition...and this – the most important part of repentance – to know that in great mercy...pity for the one in misery – God sent His Son for you. He did not hesitate in the greatest love you've ever known to do something about your condition. So Jesus came and lived for you – counting His holy life for you – so that your sinful life is now covered by His perfection; He came to die for you – to take your sin, all about your life that has offended God and others upon Himself – so that by His blood and through His stripes you are healed. He came to rise for you, to conquer the grave that awaits sinners who die, but on account of their Savior Jesus, turns the grave into a failed prison: His life for you means that your life cannot be confined by death. Death cannot hold you, the life of Jesus shines too brightly in you; you are a child of God and life prevails.

This is your preparation for Christmas Christian: repentance and bearing the fruits. Repent! Experience the work of God in your life through His Word and Sacrament! Bear fruits! Experience the work of God in your life through His Word and Sacrament! You have come to the feast this day, the feast of new life that leaves behind the old life. Don't be ashamed, it is fruit...it is God's sign in your life that you belong to Him; and that you are prepared for Jesus! Thanks be to God!