

December 5, 2021 St. Peter Lutheran Church, Doss, TX

“Repent is a Word that Never Grows Old”

Luke 3:3, 7-18 Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Advent is a time of repentance and for doing justice. If doing justice as individuals and as a church seems new, these texts have been Advent texts year after year. “Prepare the way of the Lord” does not mean to get ready to celebrate Christmas. I was in Wal-mart in line and saw a Baptist friend who wished me Merry Christmas. I said, “Happy Advent.” “We don’t do that,” she said. I said we are looking at Christ’s second coming or advent before we celebrate His birthday. She walked away as if I poured water on her parade. But this time of year, is one of those ‘otherness’ times when we as Christians are not like the world who are busily preparing for the holidays, and not particularly for Christ’s birthday. You can’t even say ‘Merry Christmas’ in a public. Someone might be offended.

John the Baptist preached righteousness and repentance very clearly. The crowds of people, the tax collectors and soldiers asked what they were to do to live right and John didn’t tell them to do any of the 6 marks of discipleship. He said: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors

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On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew. Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So, they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So, the property

committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown!

(Wedel, Theodore "Evangelism-the Mission of the Church to Those Outside Her Life" Ecumenical Review, October, 1953.)

The author of this parable depicts the perennial danger confronting the church which is irrelevance and loss of the sense of mission. Perhaps the greatest peril is in periods when the church is outwardly "successful." The parable highlights the fact that the only relevance that really matters is relevance to the *deep needs of persons, relevance* to the places in their lives where they hurt and hope, struggle and pray, hunger for meaning and for significant relationships. Spirit-led care is a valuable instrument by which the church stays relevant to human need. We need to ask God to help us listen and pray with others who are in need.

Spirit-led care is a means by which a local church is helped to remain a lifesaving station and not a club; a hospital and a garden of the spiritual life and not a museum. Spirit-led care can help save those areas of our lives which are shipwrecked on the hidden reefs of anxiety, guilt, and lack of integrity. Spirit-led care can help transform the interpersonal life of a congregation. It can make that church a place of reconciliation, healing, and growth. Spirit-led care contributes to the renewal of a church's vitality by providing an instrument for the

renewal of persons, relationships, and groups. By reducing the crippledness of our ability to give and receive love, Christ's care through us can help us to *be* the church - the community in which God's love becomes an experienced reality.

I was discussing this story with a friend of mine who asked: Why this story touched me? I told her that my original intent was to simply finish it and say, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." But the story is also springboard for the heart. If it touches you, ask why. It touches me because I care about following Jesus and caring for you. The word "pastor" to me means *shepherd*. What does it mean to you? Some might want a pastor to be more of a cruise director or a cheer leader. In my understanding, the pastor leads his people to green pastures just like in Psalm 23. When you walk through valleys of shadows of fear, death, or confusion, your pastor will walk with you and point you to the light, Jesus Christ, Who is also walking beside you. When the table is prepared before you in the presence of our worldly enemies, he or she leads you in a prayer of thanks. We always need to watch ourselves or else our mission suffers. If we don't reach out, then we conveniently forget what Jesus said: "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me." And later, "Go therefore and disciple all nations... Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Love one another as I have loved you. These are commands that we can pray for God to help us do.

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus in our Gospel for today: *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.* Why would judgment be good news except that there is a God Who cares for you and Who is doing something about it! Alternatively, at the time of Noah, God just got fed up and destroyed the whole world except for Noah and other passengers on the ark. So, then the focus of our text is the verse of John: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* Phillip's translation has: **See that you do something to show that your hearts are really changed.** We are called to make a difference in our world. We pray in the prayer Jesus taught, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done." Luther says, God's kingdom comes indeed without praying for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us... God's will is done when he hinders and defeats every evil scheme and purpose of the devil, the world and our sinful self and would oppose the coming of his kingdom." Faithful followers of Jesus are not spectators in the church; otherwise, we would not be in mission. We need to spread the love of God through our care, justice, mercy, and prayer. May God strengthen you for that task, fellow life saver. Amen