

Repent
A Sermon by Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday October 23, 2022

Luke 3:1-23

I'd like to recap we've been so far with a video on Luke Chapters 1-2.

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/gospel-luke-1/>

The story continues. We have God's Messiah born, and John reappears in the wilderness telling everyone "Prepare for God's rule!" A new day is about to dawn, God's kingdom, God's salvation is going to break into our midst so get ready.

When do we usually hear these words? In Advent. What is in competition for our attention during Advent? Christmas parties, Christmas concerts, Christmas visits, Christmas shopping, Christmas baking, and so much more. What does any of that have to do with John and John's words to us? Very little God's rule is breaking into our midst and John tells us that we are to bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

God's people who wanted to welcome God's kingdom, who wanted to be ready for God's rule lined up at the banks of the river Jordan. They were remembering and re-enacting one of those defining moments as God's people. Long ago their ancestors crossed the Jordan River and took the land promised to them by God.

When they had crossed over the Jordan, and took the land there was a day when Joshua gathered all the people and their leaders and asked them to choose who they were going to worship. Joshua reminded them of all that God had done for them and for their ancestors, and that day he asked them to choose who they were going to serve – the living God, the LORD, or the gods of Egypt or the gods of the Canaanites. The people pledged themselves to God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and Joshua, but they did not follow God's ways and were not faithful.

As a result of them turning away from God, rebelling again and again and again and again, they were handed over to their enemies, Jerusalem was destroyed, the people were taken captive. The people were eventually returned to their land, the Temple was rebuilt, but at this time the Romans controlled the land and all the people.

John comes with the message of a new day, prepare for the new king of Israel to come. Make yourself ready – go back to the waters of Jordan and begin again. Pledge yourself anew to worship God and God alone.

Sometimes a person will want to be baptized a second time or make another confession of faith. Our assurance of forgiveness each Sunday is a reminder that God's mercies are new every day. But turning towards the living God is not just about warm feelings and sentiment. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance."

It's not enough just to go into the waters, the life on the other side is to be different. It's as radical as sharing what you have, living justly and honestly before God and with your neighbor. Soldiers and tax-collectors were among those wanting to be part of God's new kingdom. They were told to do their work honestly.

This may be a new day, but John's message was as old as the prophets and God's law. People were called to share what they had with the poor.

The prophet Micah summed it up with the words; "Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before your God." Jesus summed it up; "Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Those words are simple but living them is not so simple. We are a people prone to scheming and working the angles for our own advantage. We worry, if I share with you, will there be enough for me? We see what greed does to one another. We see how painful life is for many because of unjust systems, and unjust people.

As I read these words from John about repenting and bearing fruit worthy of repentance my heart cries out "yes". God's kingdom is what I long for, it is what I want to give my life to, to live in a community where we care for one another, where we bear each other's sorrows, and rejoice together in joy, where we all experience peace with God and each other.

But as my heart cries "yes" and "amen", my mind cries that we are doomed. For in my own strength, I cannot do the good I long to do. Israel couldn't keep the commands of God faithfully, and neither can I. So where does that leave us?

I take a page from AA and other 12 step programs. I can go into the chilling waters of the Jordan, and repent and turn towards God, but part of that repentance says; "God, I am a sinner, and I can't live faithfully, justly, generously, apart from you."

And then we turn to Jesus. Jesus was baptized by John in the waters, and the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and the voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus is the only one who lives faithfully, justly, generously with God and neighbor. And as Jesus comes out of the waters, anointed by the Holy Spirit, the invitation to us is to follow him, and learn his ways. Jesus did not need to repent, but we do. For us Jesus Christ came into the world; for us he was baptized; for us he lived and showed God's love; And so the Word of Scripture is fulfilled: "We love because God loved us first."

Repenting, participating in God's rule, living in the kingdom of God, is a decision we make to follow Jesus his precise example and teachings, to trust him and ways, and to rely on him and his help, and seeking his forgiveness when we fall. Then we learn to be generous, to share what we have, to live justly, and faithfully before God.

Let us pray: God we hear John's call to repent, to turn, to live faithfully, generously, humbly, and we confess that we can't do that in our own strength. Thank you for Jesus' baptism for us, we turn and follow him, his ways, his teachings, his life and example. Amen.

Luke 3:1-23 The Message

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

⁷ 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? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased."

²³ Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli,