

Advent 3  
December 13, 2015

Text: Luke 3:7-18

Theme: John's Message Prepares us for Christmas

1. With a word of warning
2. With a word of comfort

Gaudete! Some of you old timers may remember that word. It's the historic name for this third Sunday in Advent. Gaudete. In fact, we light this pink candle on the wreath today which is the candle representing the joy of the shepherds who first heard the good news. The second lesson for today ties in well with that thought. As does the reading from Zephaniah. Even the Psalm for today spoke about the rejoicing that comes in the morning. Yet here in our text, the words of John jump right out at us. **You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?** Such joy in that message. So what's the connection between this stern proclamation of the law and the joy that pervades this day and during this pre-Christmas time?

Try if you can to put yourself into the shoes of someone who celebrates Christmas simply by going through the externals. Sure, there's joy in the giving and receiving of gifts. And there's joy in gathering with family and friends. There'd be joy to know that you have a few days off. And we can't minimize those joys, they are indeed gifts from God. But they don't have the same joy that you have. What is it that they are lacking? Of course there's the news of Jesus. But could it be that they've never heard about him? In our world in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, I doubt it. But what they don't have is an understanding of him and their need for him. And perhaps our joy isn't what it could be because we lack there too.

Now I know that most of you have been through confirmation instruction, so it's not a complete lack of understanding that robs us of such joy. But it might be muted because our understanding, our focus and that sometimes we are influenced by the ways of Satan and this world. Is sin so prominent in the world that you've become calloused in recognizing your failures? God isn't an angry judge who will condemn me. He loves all people. Well it's true that it was God's love for the world that moved him to send Jesus, but standing alongside that very same love is a just God who says, **I hate all who do wrong.** (*Psalm 5:5*)

Is there a part of you that is influenced by our culture of personal accountability that you'd rather simply do it yourself? And because you try really hard to do the right, you might think God will overlook those times you don't. John said, **You brood of vipers**, to just such people. They were merely going through the motions. Therefore John continued, **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** In other words, it's not just recognize sin, but turn from it. See it, acknowledge it and have the change of mind and heart that says I'm not going to do it any more.

That change is pictured in the examples that John shared. Share a tunic and your food with those who lack. Don't extort or take unfair advantage of anyone. These fly in the face of the selfish nature we're born with. These require trust in God to continue to provide and meet our every need. Don't just come to worship confessing your sins week after week. Change. Have that reversal we talked about in the children's message. Turn around and do something different. Do the right thing for the right reason.

But what's the sense? How can we ever get ahead in life if we're always looking out for others? But that's the point John was driving home. Life is not first about here. It's about preparation for the life that is to come. See John came not only with that harsh word of warning calling to repentance he came with a word of comfort of God's promise. **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...And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.** Of course the one of whom John speaks is Jesus. When we understand our utter depravity then only can we fully appreciate the gift that Jesus brings. When we understand our total depravity and yet in spite of us God sent his Son, can we experience the true joy of Christmas. Then only do we have the power to truly repent and amend our sinful way of living.

Week after week after week, Sunday and after Sunday, we gather and begin our worship with the confession of sins. And you could probably recite those words in your sleep. And maybe sometimes with all of the distractions in your life, maybe you do recite them with out truly pondering their meaning and what sins you committed and how those sins have offended our God as you just go along with the rest of the congregation zombie style. But those words of confession should be pondered. Those words should stream to your mind those most troubling sins you've committed. Those words should carry to the throne of God's grace the deep sorrow of genuine repentance and the desire to amend.

And the words of absolution to ring sweetly in your ears as you hear from the pastor as from God himself that your sins are indeed forgiven. And it is so because on that night so long ago, God sent his Son, born of the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent and destroy the viper's heart that resides inside us all. He sent Jesus to bring rescue and relief from our most deadly and eternal poison that infected us.

Gaudete? Yes. Even with that deep view of our sins, in fact we are most joyful when we see just how deeply our sins impact us, the eternal consequences we deserve. For this baby of whose birth we rejoice and sing went from the manger to the cross to save us, to forgive us and to empower our lives of repentance with the thankfulness that comes from the recognition of who we once were and who we now are, not on account of ourselves, but on account of his work and God's grace in crediting it to our account.

Gaudete? Yes indeed for we are no longer vipers destined for death, but dearly loved children destined for eternity with him now and forever.