

“Fruits of Repentance”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
3 Advent – December 13, 2009  
Luke 3:7-18

Last week when the bishop was here, he referred to me as a “sparkle with a collar” in his sermon. People have been teasing me about it all week. In light of the bishop’s comments, I couldn’t help comparing my preaching style to John the Baptist’s. I bet you’re glad to have me preaching to you this week, and not him. No one would ever refer to him as a “sparkle,” even if he did wear a collar in place of his camel hair and leather belt. They might consider him a fireball, but that’s very different from a sparkle.

I tend to start my sermons with amusing anecdotes or stories. He begins his with “You brood of vipers!” What would that feel like? Coming in on Sunday morning and having Michael or me get up and start preaching, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” I bet that some of you, maybe even many of you, would decide that Hickory Neck was not the place for you after all. You might think that your priest had been possessed by a demon or at least by a fundamentalist. That’s certainly not the kind of sermon that you expect to hear in an Episcopal church. Who wants to come to church to feel bad about themselves? Aren’t we supposed to hear good news in church?

And yet Luke describes John the Baptist’s preaching by saying, “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Luke says John’s sermons were proclaiming the good news. Maybe he had a different definition of good news than we do.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news. Which do you want to hear first?” Well we’d all prefer to hear the good news without the bad news, right, because good news is news we want to hear. The “good” in good news implies that it’s happy or positive news. It suggests that we’re going to feel good about what we hear. The word gospel itself means good news, and I think most of us consider the story of Jesus to be pretty good news. Redemption, resurrection, eternal life. All good things, right?

So what’s John going on and on about with the brood of vipers and taking an axe to the tree and fleeing from wrath? In Luke’s version he isn’t just addressing Pharisees or other religious leaders; he’s addressing the whole crowd. They had come out to the wilderness to be baptized by him, and instead of making them feel good, John chastises them. Essentially he is telling them that they are sinners and that they can’t hide from that by claiming some kind of immunity because Abraham was their ancestor. It’s not about whom they’re descended from or what has happened in the past; it’s about what they’re doing in the present. “Bear fruits of repentance,” he urges them. You are sinners. Bear fruits of repentance.

That’s something we can hear, isn’t it. We are sinners, just like those people in the first century. Time and time again we turn away from God, turn to do our own wills, turn to some other authority for our lives, turn away from the health and wholeness that God wills for us. Bear fruits of repentance. How, we might ask. That’s exactly what John’s listeners wanted to know. “What should we do?”

Here's where we know that John isn't just out to insult them or make them feel bad. He doesn't continue to call them names or tell them they're worthless or damned. He talks to them about justice, equality, and righteousness. If you have two coats, share one. If you have food, then share some with those who don't. Note that he didn't give identical instructions to everyone. He tells tax collectors to be fair and not greedy in their collecting. He tells soldiers to stick to their wages and not threaten others in order to get more. It makes me wonder what John might say if a corporate executive were to show up. I have a feeling that John wouldn't take kindly to someone receiving large bonuses while employees further down the chain were laid off. Brood of vipers might be the perfect description.

But I shouldn't pick on corporate executives. All the people who went out to hear John were sinners, and all of us are sinners. I suspect that John would have some choice words for all of us. We all need to bear the fruits of repentance. But since we don't have him here to tell us what to do, then we're still left with the question of how? How do we bear the fruits of repentance?

Last week when the bishop was here, one of the things we did as part of the confirmation service was to renew our baptismal covenant. It's a great place to look for the fruits of repentance. When we are baptized, in addition to being initiated into the church, and sharing Christ's death and resurrection, we are cleansed of our sins. But, being baptized doesn't mean we no longer have to repent. Baptism gives us the structure in which our repentance takes place – it begins us on the journey of repentance.

The fruits of that journey are the things we agree to in the baptismal covenant: continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers; continuing to resist evil and repenting when we fall into sin; proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ (just like John did); seeking and serving Christ in all people, loving our neighbors as ourselves; striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. If you want to know whether you're bearing the fruits of repentance, then ask yourself how well you're keeping your baptismal promises. How well are you seeking and serving Christ in all persons or respecting the dignity of every human being? How well are you striving for justice and peace? I know when I ask myself those questions that there is plenty of room for growth.

We have to be careful at this point not to think that we're earning our redemption. If we had to earn it, there would be no hope. The good news that Jesus brings is that we don't have to earn salvation; it's a gift. The fruits of repentance are the *result* of our redemption, not the *cause* of it. Jesus brings redemption, and we bear the fruit. The fruit that we bear is found in those promises we renewed last week.

This week we head deeper into the Advent season, drawing ever nearer to a manger in Bethlehem, and we encounter this fireball preacher John in the wilderness. His message sounds harsh and strange, but it is good news to us. We are sinners. But Jesus is coming. Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us that we may bear the fruits of repentance.

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