

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 3:1–14 (15–20)

Sermon: “Hark! A Glad Sound”

“Hark the glad sound!” we sing during Advent.

“Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! ‘Christ is near,’ we hear it say. ‘Cast away the works of darkness, All you children of the day!’” (LSB 345:1).

Listen! There is something thrilling to hear! But don’t just sing about listening to the glad sound; don’t just sing about listening to the thrilling voice.

May we also ourselves listen to that glad and thrilling voice!

What does it sound like? Well, the glad and thrilling sound in our text this morning sounds something like this: ***“You brood of vipers! Produce fruits worthy of repentance! Share your clothing and your food, don’t cheat others out of money, and be content with what you get paid.”***

Now, hold on! I thought this was supposed to be a glad sound, a thrilling voice. But when we truly listen to John the Baptist, it just sounds like he’s preaching at us. And who likes to be preached at? We don’t much care for somebody standing up and telling us we’re bad and wrong and telling us we need to do this or that.

To the sinful human heart, there's nothing worse than being preached at. Who does that person think he is to tell me what to do? That's how our sinful hearts react.

However, faith, the faith in Christ which God has granted us in our hearts when faith hears preaching from God's Word . . . when faith hears that there's a better life to be lived than the one I'm living right now . . . when faith hears that there's a new King coming and a new Kingdom to live in . . . when faith hears that this King is merciful, that he does not condemn us for our sins and our weakness, but that he is also the Lamb of God who bears our sins on the cross . . . when faith hears that this King comes not only to forgive us but also to raise us up to newness of life . . . faith hears all this as a glad sound . . . as the most thrilling voice.

Yes, my fellow sinners and believers in Jesus Christ, confess along with me that God's ways are better than our ways. Confess with me today that our lives leave much to be desired before God. And rejoice with me today at the glad news that Jesus Christ has come into the world to grant sinners like us mercy and forgiveness, and to lift us up to living a new and better life!

The good news of a new life may sound preachy, it may sound irritating, to the sinful heart. But to faith, the voice that urges us to new life in Christ is a glad sound. Today, let's consider John the Baptist's thrilling call to a new life in Christ by reflecting on three phrases from our text.

"You brood of vipers!" (v 7). John the Baptist apparently wasn't much of a charmer! There are a lot of polite and acceptable ways to extend a greeting to someone: "Welcome!" "How are you today?" "It's nice to see you." "Thank you for coming." "Ladies and gentlemen . . ." Calling people the offspring of poisonous serpents, on the contrary not so courteous!

In Matthew's Gospel, Matthew emphasizes that John was especially making this accusation against the Pharisees and Sadducees, but here in our text from Luke, the Scripture shows us that John was also rebuking the entire crowd of people who came to him with this stinging accusation: ***"You brood of vipers!"*** And so, this morning, John the Baptist aims that sharp accusation at each of us as well: "You brood of vipers! You children of snakes and of that ancient snake, the devil!"

What on earth would possess this man to greet his guests in such a manner? And who was he, anyway, to say something like that about them about us!—this wild-looking man in the wilderness?

John was the messenger sent by God to prepare the people for the coming Jesus Christ by leading them to repent of their sins, and through repentance to find forgiveness for their sins in Jesus. Calling people to repentance is just what John is doing by this accusation: ***“You brood of vipers!”*** This isn’t just a colorful way of speaking; this isn’t an exaggeration just for effect. Rather, in truth, we were, in our sinfulness, a child of the devil.

The sin which still pulses in our hearts and veins is serious and vile, poisonous and deadly. Because of our sinfulness, we deserve no more kindness and clemency from God than would be shown a venomous viper slithering on the ground. The true repentance to which John the Baptist calls us is a repentance which looks on our own sin as horrifying and repulsive—a repentance which confesses, ***“I am a poor miserable sinner.”*** Repentance does not look on sins with indifference or amusement, and certainly not with pride, as if to glory in one’s shame.

Repentant hearts look upon our sin with dread and willingly agree that we are indeed a ***“brood of vipers!”***

We could say that John’s harsh greeting, ***“You brood of vipers,”*** framed up a narrow gate there by the Jordan River. At that gate, some people, including many Pharisees and teachers of the law, turned away and refused to believe John’s message. But many others entered through that gate; they owned up to the label “brood of vipers.” They came to John in repentance to hear the good news of the forgiveness of their sins and to be baptized.

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (v 8). John warns that true repentance and forgiveness is the only escape from the severe judgment that is soon to come. Don’t think that a casual repentance that goes through the motions without a genuine sorrow and turning away from our sins will save you. Don’t think that just because we are children of Abraham or Missouri Synod Lutherans we are secure. The judgment is coming; the axe is already laid at the foot of the tree. Only through true repentance and forgiveness will sinners escape ***“from the wrath to come”*** (v 7).

Our own Lutheran Confessions are very clear on this point. They declare that good fruit, good works of every kind in life, should follow repentance. There can be no true conversion or repentance where resistance of sinning and good fruits do not follow. True repentance does not permit the indulgence of the body in lusts. True faith is not ungrateful to God. Neither does true faith hate God's commandments. In a word, there is no inner repentance unless it also produces the outward turning away from sinning. The Lutheran Confessions tell us to, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" (see Ap XII 131–32).

Yet it is also important to remember that John's message is described in our text as "good news" not bad news. Just a few verses after today's Gospel, we read: "***With many other exhortations, [John] preached good news to the people.***" And the good news is that whoever does repent of his sins finds forgiveness as a free gift of God, a free gift which does not depend on our own good works or good fruits, but rather depends on the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The eager question of the people: ***“What then shall we do?”*** (v 10). For those who acknowledged their sins and received the joy and power of God’s forgiveness, John’s words were not a threat, but rather a thrilling encouragement and promise: “Now you will bear fruits worthy of repentance!” Among those coming out to John, there were many who repented and were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Their hearts, relieved and exuberant, begged John to tell them: now what? What shall we do now that we are forgiven? What shall we do now that God has graciously welcomed us into his kingdom?

And John answered them: ***“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise”*** (v 11). Luke writes that ***“even” tax collectors and soldiers were asking John, “What shall we do?”*** (vs 12, 14). Luke seems amazed at this! Even tax collectors and soldiers, two occupations particularly known for dishonesty and harassment, even they were transformed by the thrilling news of the Messiah. They gladly asked this prophet of God what they could do to express the gratitude filling their hearts.

What kinds of things could they do that would be worthy of such great and free forgiveness?

John's answer to these questions was that the good fruits of repentance and faith are changes in our daily lives. Show others the same kind of generous and merciful love that God has shown you.

Paul often wrote in this way, when he was encouraging the saints in various cities. To the Colossians, Paul writes that he prays they may ***“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work”*** (Colossians 1:10). To the Philippians, he writes, ***“Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ”*** (Philippians 1:27). And to the Thessalonians: ***“Walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory”*** (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

By faith, we, too, desire to live lives worthy of our great Savior, worthy of the great salvation which has been proclaimed and given to us. Not that our lives, in themselves, are worthy of the Lord. All Christians fall short, and that is why we live always in repentance, and that is why our confidence and trust must always be in Christ alone.

This Advent let us listen anew to the glad, thrilling message of John the Baptist: ***“The Savior is near! The kingdom of God is near! Repent, and live out your new life in Christ! Produce fruits worthy of repentance!”*** To some, it sounds preachy. But by faith, we bow in repentance, we behold the mercy of Christ, and we gladly reply, “What shall we do?”

Amen