

ADVENT 3
ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7
LUKE 3:7-18
DECEMBER 16, 17, 2006

YEAR C

John was an interesting sort of character. His appearance on the edge of the wilderness caused many to come out to see who this might be. They came out to hear what the Baptist was saying and some came to repentance. As we look at these verses from Luke 3, we see that John the Baptist did not come with flattering words. He did not begin his conversation with endearing words that would make them feel all warm inside. Not many preachers in the Lutheran church would begin their sermons in the way John opened this one. **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”**

What is a brood of vipers? A brood is a group of young ones. On the farm you might have a brooder house. This is the place where the baby chicks are allowed to be nurtured and grow. When John called the people a brood of vipers, he is calling them children of snakes. You might not come back next week if I called you children of snakes. You also might become offended if I started talking about your family name. The people coming out to John were claiming to be children of Abraham. John tells them that there is nothing significant about being children of Abraham if you are a bunch of snakes slithering in the grass.

John’s ministry was not one that necessarily made the people feel good about themselves. His ministry was about the truth. He was coming to prepare the way of the Lord. He was coming to help the people open the way to the Lord who would be coming. The truth of the matter is that these were people that had been wandering from the truth for many generations. They had stopped caring about the important values of hospitality and caring. They had stopped being a caring community and were looking out for number one. John’s message caused the people to listen and change. They asked what they needed

to do. Luke 3 does not tell us whether they repented. It does not say were ready to bear the fruits of repentance. It does tell that they went out to hear John's message. It also caused them to ask that they should do.

Many heard this word from John. They did not turn and leave but they wanted to know more. I believe they saw themselves in what John was saying and they repented. They changed the way they walked and talked. They changed the way they thought and lived. This is what repentance is. It is changing your life in preparation for the coming of the Lord. Many that had been referred to as a brood of vipers were truly becoming children of Abraham and ready to respond in faith and to the word of God.

Some that came to where John was were ordinary people that had wandered from the truth. They asked John what they were supposed to do. Others were tax collectors and soldiers. They also asked what to do. You and I might not like to hear what they must do because this causes us to also do something in response to repentance.

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

We have only nine shopping days until Christmas. Many of us have shopping yet to do while others must prepare for family and friends that will be coming. For some, the furthest things from our mind is worrying about giving clothes to those that have none or food to those that are hungry. We want to make our families happy. We want to take care of our own family but then we hear the words of John the Baptist. The Greek text does not tell them to share one of their coats. For some reason we have chosen to make this a bit easier than John intended. When John tells us to share a coat he is actually talking about an undershirt. He says that anyone that has two undershirts must give one to someone that has none. John is talking about the intimacy of the people. He is

telling us that we are not a people unto ourselves, but we are part of each other.

I might be the pastor bringing you a message from God each week, but I am not a person that is apart from you. I am with you and sharing with you. I am one that shares the truth from God's word and I am one that seeks to live in honesty as I lead and serve you. We live in a certain intimacy that says we know each other and yet we continue to love and care. John also talks to the tax collectors. There is a reason the tax collectors were so despised. Part of it was that they worked for the Romans, but a more significant part is that they were likely to collect more taxes than were due. Tax collectors paid a fee to the Romans for the right to collect taxes. They actually paid the Romans up front so that whatever they collected was theirs to keep. The people often did not know how much was due. It would be like you and me paying our taxes without knowing how much was due. We might pay more just to stay out of trouble.

The soldiers John talked about were not Roman soldiers, but soldiers appointed by the Jews. The soldiers often worked with tax collectors offering protection but also making sure the people paid the tax. You can understand how all of these practices were open to corruption. The people came out and they sought to change. John had their attention and now they could be taught.

Luke 3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

How can this be good news? John has just called them a brood of vipers and told them that being children of Abraham is not big accomplishment. John told them they were in danger of being cut off and thrown into the fire. How is this good news? It is good news because John is speaking the word of truth that will help the people understand their need for repentance. This word is good news because the people did change because of John's proclamation from the

word of God. It is good news because their response to this word was the fruits of repentance.

You and I have heard this word today. We can see ourselves in one of the three groups of people that responded to John's teaching. You and I can see what we need to do to bear the fruits of repentance. As we enter this last week before Christmas, we know what we must do to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. We know that we must repent and allow the Lord into our hearts. Many will surely say that this is not a very good Lutheran text because it is heavy on works and shows very little in the way of being "saved by grace through faith." The truth is that the works being described by John are in response to the saving grace of God. The works that you and I do are in response to what the Lord has already done. The work we do is the work that bears fruits of righteousness, repentance, forgiveness and the acceptance of God's grace. The good news is that you have come to a place that you accept this grace of God and your hearts are prepared for the coming of the Lord. Because you are prepared you will see that person with no undershirt and you will give him one of yours. You will not collect more than you are entitled to and you will be content with your wages. You will be honest in all parts of your life.

John's message is for you and me. As we hear his voice let us ask that we must do. Once we know what we are to do we go out and do what the Lord asks of us. We live our lives for the Lord. We serve the Lord with all parts of our lives and we proclaim the message of the gospel. AMEN