

Luke 3:7-18  
Preparing Our Lives  
Sunday December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

The summer of my 9<sup>th</sup> year here on earth was spent catching snakes, climbing trees and building tree houses.



My brothers, friends and I caught buckets and buckets full of snakes. I learned how to catch those garter snakes without getting bit. It really never occurred to any of us that any of the snakes could be poisonous; so we caught them by the bucket full much to the horror of our moms and the consternation of our neighbor when we left a bucket of snakes in his tree house and they all died.

We found them several days later by the smell. One of the unpleasant memories of my childhood was removing that bucket.

Well, where did we get all of these snakes? Right across the street from my house was a big grassy field with all sorts of things lying in the grass for snakes to live under. We just turned things over and started grabbing snakes.

We caught lots of snakes until one little boy playing with matches set that grass on fire. The flames leaped 20-30 feet in the air. All the snakes that did not flee were fried. That ended our summer of buckets full of snakes.

That image of fire destroying everything in its path and a neighbor trying to fight the fire with a garden hose until he fled for his life is seared into my mind. 50 years later I can still see the flames.

This image of snakes and people fleeing a raging grass fire is the image that John the Baptist wanted firmly in the minds of the crowds

that came out to listen to him; because he referred to these people as poisonous snakes fleeing a fire. He said they were snakes seeking to save their skins through baptism, but not seeking God.

Advent again is a time of preparation. It is a time of preparing our lives for the coming of our Savior Jesus the Christ. In John and Jesus' day there was a huge expectation of the return of the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. John was sent to prepare the people, but he had a rather harsh way of doing it.

Imagine you were on the banks of the Jordan with John with great expectations for salvation through baptism, but when the prophet got up to preach no words of comfort came, only condemnation and judgement.

**“You poisonous bunch of snakes!” is how John first addressed them. “Who warned you to flee from the fires of hell?”**

The biting sarcasm and judgement can be felt. We ask, how can this be good news as verse 18 declares? Well in one sense to hear the Good News we must first know the bad news. To rejoice in a message of healing we must first hear the diagnosis of illness. To rejoice in our salvation we must know at one point we were judged and condemned.

The image here that John portrays is not a group of people running towards something in hope, joy, and love; but a bunch of poisonous snakes fleeing in front of a raging grass fire that if they hesitate; it will lead to their immediate destruction.

The crowds gathered not in hope, but in fear. Their hearts were not committed to God; they were committed to saving their skins.

“To repent” literally means to turn. It means to turn to God. John was guiltig people to turn to God out of fear. Jesus' Good News was to turn to God as the light, as a flower turns to the sun for life.



Jesus was encouraging people to turn from darkness to the Light of Life.

John was preaching that baptism was a sign of such repentance. But those that were seeking baptism were seeing the baptism as a means of salvation. John's message was, "No, if your hearts are far from God baptism will not save you."

But the crowds that came claimed they were "Children of Abraham." So God owed them their salvation. John replied, "Your racially origin is nothing. Your ancestry, race, religion counts for nothing, because God can make 'Abe's' babes from mere stones. Try again.

God through John was calling for a heartfelt commitment to God that was lived out in daily living. John's message was that it was a genuine heartfelt commitment that God demanded to be lived out in daily actions.

The caution here is that nothing will save you but God. And oh how we try to rely on so many other things than God as our key to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The crowds said, "We're Hebrews so God will let us in." John says, no.

We hear them and others say we're baptized, and baptized the "right" way; so God will let us in. The answer is no!

Others say we're part of the right Church, God will let us in! No!

In fact we sometimes say we pray and fast and read the Word and praise God in just the right and modern way so that God will let us in, no try again!

We practice endless acts of social justice and mercy and think because of this God will let us in, no!

Universalists claim all we gotta' do is believe, in anything, and God will let us in and still the answer comes back, no!

The crowds came to John believing and that was not enough. The Pharisees came "doing" and that was not enough.

So we ask today like the crowds asked in verse 10, **"What then should we do?" How should we prepare our lives?**

Before I explore more of John's answer I must say that what we need to do is a combination of the above. It is believing, praying, belonging, reading, practicing justice and mercy, being baptized and more.

Basically, though, it is believing and practicing. It is a genuine heartfelt total lifestyle commitment to God in Jesus Christ. But the heartfelt, lived out in life commitment, we substitute for in so many ways.

Another way of saying this is some merely, believe, but their hearts are not in it and neither are their actions. Others merely act, trusting in their good works, their baptism, their church, but their hearts not in it. Their commitment is not there.

When heartfelt commitment and action come together we have genuine repentance, faith and new life. The inner thoughts and feelings and the outer actions of our lives must come together for repentance to be genuine and judgment be removed.

The crowds believed but their lives didn't show it. John said their lives needed to show repentance and told them how when they asked, "what shall we do?"



Repentance, in that it is a turning to God, is a lifelong endeavor. We don't just once in our lives turn to the Light of Jesus Christ; we spend our lives seeking God; turning to God. A wise 17 year old youth I used to work with told me this one day. He said, "The reason why adults are asking youth all the time "what do you want to be when you grow up" is that they are looking for a few good ideas." So true. We as God's servants are always asking and seeking what to be for God.

John had 3 answers for those in the crowds. For the crowd in general and in fact for all in general he told us to share. Verse 11 says, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." We do that here at Vista in our "Share the Warmth Drive" and through our "Snak Pak" program, food for the Hospitality House and more.

To the tax collectors John said, "Be honest."

To the soldiers he said, "Not to extort money, or threaten, or lie for personal gain."

Basically, to all he said not to be controlled by greed or personal gain. He called for acts of kindness, justice and mercy as evidence of a changed heart, as evidence of repentance and a new life.

Belief, thought, feeling and action were all combined together to evidence repentance and new life.

John's list of "things to do as signs of repentance" is not remarkable or extraordinary. It is, though, a rejection of greed and materialism, which is a timely message in all the buying and selling of Christmas.

It is a call to do acts of neighborly love where you are at and with whom you interact. For some, God has specific ministries and callings and leadership roles, others are called to join in missions and ministries already in place like those our Christmas offering will support like Wesley Center at the U of A, and the Hospitality House.

These acts of repentance and actions of our lives are important, but as I said they won't save us. Only One will save you and John begins to introduce him in verse 16, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worth to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

When John spoke these words of praise for Jesus, he had yet to baptize Jesus, he had yet to reveal the Messiah to the world, to anoint the "Anointed One"; but John was the one who did the ground work, he prepared the way for the Living One, the Incarnation of hope and love.

In Jesus Christ the Messiah all our attempts at producing our own salvation are stopped. Our efforts are stopped in that we see the futility of doing it on our own. We see the shabbiness and emptiness of our own efforts and claims on God.

We also find in the Master's hands that he takes our feeble efforts for good and strengthens them. What we are lacking he adds. Where sin still clings he provides cleansing.

For the crowds that gathered seeking the outward sign of baptism to save them; Christ brought the inward renewal of their hearts and minds. For those who trusted in outward shows of religiosity and acts of justice and mercy, Christ brought inward compassion and commitment.

For those who merely praised God all the time and were lost in the religious experience Christ like John brought a call to ethical and moral action.

Christ completes our feeble efforts and when we rely on our feeble efforts he takes them away until all that remains is a sure reliance on him. Christ comes to us today as Holy Spirit; as wind and fire.

All of us need lives of meaning and purpose with an assurance of salvation. We all need to keep turning to God in heart, mind and action through prayer, worship, holy conversation, reading the Word and more and even in the serendipities of life. Some call them coincidences; we of faith call them the timing and purposes of God.

In living life we often find our calling. I spent 24 years in youth ministry because 35 years ago I was getting married and needed a job. A Church needed a youth director, I applied and was hired. There is more to the story than that; but God's hand was in this, and used my simple life necessity to work his will.

If you are searching for your calling today or a new one let's talk. There are many ministries here you can be involved in, in fact, we need more Stephen Ministers and visitors for our visitors: but for some the calling is deeper and more obscure. Let's talk.

Christ as fire comes to burn away all the chaff in our life, the confusion, the misdirection, the sin. He comes to burn away false hopes for salvation in religion, or race, or church, or actions.

As fire He burns away all that would hinder us, all that would hurt us, all that would keep us away from him and his will.

In the end he offers hope, hope that we can turn towards a light, a fire that attracts us rather than one that drives us in fear and terror.

Come Jesus said, come and repent, turn to God to be renewed, remade and healed. Come let the Wind and Fire burn through your life, burn through your soul until all that remains is you and God!

I ask you now to come to the Lord, your hearts and minds are ready. Come to the Lord in repentance, hope and faith.

Come knowing the fires that Christ speaks of are for cleansing and renewal and new life. Your chaff will be burned away.

For Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, he who comes to me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

Come now. Christ awaits!

Let us pray. Today dear Jesus in this crowd there are some who trust in so many things other than you. Send your Holy Spirit to cleanse our lives of these things and renew us and grant us the light of life. Come Wind and Fire we are yours! In Jesus' name amen.

If you prayed this prayer and made a new commitment to God with your life come and speak with our Stephen minister after worship.