

## ***THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT***

***Luke 3:7-18***

All over the world people are getting ready for Christmas and Christians everywhere are getting ready for the unrestrained joy of the angels, tinsel, carols, and cheery glow of Christmas. In the middle of our Christmas preparations comes the John the Baptist with his unique brand of preaching.

The Bible readings during Advent focus on John the Baptist's preaching of preparing for the coming of the Saviour. The church has always demanded that if we really want to see what's in Bethlehem's manger, we must first listen to this crazy preacher out in the wilderness. But, look at what a contrast John is to everything else that is happening at this time of the year. John, with his camel hair coat and leather belt, is a striking contrast to the jolly fat man in the plush red suit, with a bag full of gifts for those who have too much already.

While we are engrossed in singing carols about the baby in the manger, the joy of the shepherds, the visit of the Wisemen, the excitement of gift buying and gift giving, visiting relatives and friends over the Christmas period and so on, John the Baptist seems so out of place. And yet, all the Gospels have him there, at the beginning, as if to say to us that we cannot know Emmanuel, God with us, until John tells us why we so desperately need God. And so, when we come to our Advent worship services, John the Baptist intrudes into our joyous celebrations.

*"Repent!"* says John. Repent, turn around, let go. Here in this

lead up to Christmas we have a man out in a desert reminding us that we are sinners. That's an unhappy, disturbing thought. No one likes to be reminded that they are sinners, that they hurt people, that their actions and their speech leave a lot to be desired. Here we are in the midst of our Christmas celebrations and John throws cold Jordan water in our face and calls us to *repent*. We reassure ourselves that John can't be talking about us. He is really attacking criminals, hoodlums, gangsters, drug dealers - the bad types. However, John is determined not to let us off the hook, "*Repent!*" he cries in the wilderness.

As long as we think there is nothing wrong with us, as long as we try to ignore how sin controls our lives, we will never really see who is lying in the manger; we will never see what that baby has done for all of us;

we will never see the love of God that sent His only Son to die for our sake. If we want to experience the real joy of Christmas, then we must first *repent*, recognize our sinfulness, let go of it and turn away from it.

But, how hard it is for us to live as people who belong to God.

How crafty the forces of evil and Satan are, along with our own evil desires that woo us away from our baptismal identity as Christ's own people. Just as John confronted the people of Israel with their sinfulness on the banks of the Jordan, he still confronts us today. As in John's day, he also encourages us to get ready to meet Him again this Christmas, and of course, when He comes again at His Second Coming.

As we take a look at our lives, we see that we have failed to bear the good fruit that John demands, the fruits of love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, honesty, compassion and Godly living.

We really do need turning around through repentance.

It is true that there is no way to get to Bethlehem without first

getting by a fierce, condemning prophet who tells us that we are not as right as we think we are. It is true that we can't really know and appreciate what God is doing in Bethlehem, *for us*, unless we hear John the Baptist call us to account, measuring our lives, not by what nine out of ten people think, but by what God Almighty commands, a cold sobering burst of Jordan water in the face of our denials that we need God's help.

Before we rush headlong into Christmas joy, let's take the time to listen to the abrasive, rough, straight talking John the Baptist.

Joy, *real* joy, Gospel-evoked joy, comes only by way of the truth, the truth that states that only God gives true joy, the joy that comes when we believe that God's love sent to us a Saviour who cancelled our debt of sin totally and completely, and promised that His love would follow us all of our days.

There in the manger is a child, a very ordinary looking, plain and simple child, but the infant Son saves us from the punishment we deserve, He died on a cross for our forgiveness.

But to see who that child really is, and the value He has for us, we must hear what the Baptist has to say.

Let's listen carefully to John the Baptist and his call to repent.

Let's look at our lives and honestly own up to the way we have treated others unjustly and unfairly, the times we have sidelined God, found attending worship and saying our prayer too hard to fit into our busy lives, the pride that puts us above others, our lack of concern for the hurts around us, the attitudes that have built up walls of resentment.

We need to surrender those painful, sinful aspects of ourselves to God. But that's not easy to do. Repentance means giving up those pet sins that we hold on to so dearly. It means giving them up and giving them over to God to heal, restore, forgive, and make a fresh start.

Repentance is an act of faith, an act of surrender to the God who wants to hold us in His arms of love. God removes those heavy burdens of sin in order to lift us high in His gracious arms. At this time of the year when the world is working so hard to be happy, the people of Christ surrender to God to be merry, to receive God's peace. Repentance is letting go of our sin and letting God fill us with His peace.

Then, we will come to Christmas ready to see the gift God has given us in the manger of Bethlehem, and on the cross of Calvary. We will see the love, the sacrifice, the commitment, and grace of our Lord and Saviour. We will breathe a sigh of relief that God has dealt with the hurt and pain in our lives, with the gift of His Son.

But, remember, to get to this Christmas joy, we need first to get past John the Baptist and his call to *repent*.

**AMEN.**