

Sunday December 13, 2009 Luke 3:7-18

Picture this situation: A ten-year old boy has not done his homework because he watched too much TV. So he struggles through a geography test, doing a lot more guessing than answering correctly. All evening he is deeply troubled whenever he thinks of the test, however, and wonders how he'll ever pass. That night as he says his prayers, he suddenly blurts out. "And please, God, make Oconomowoc the capital of Wisconsin!"

Now that's just a story, but in real life, how often do you pray like that ten-year old, pleading that somehow God will change the reality of His Word in order to approve of our sinful mistakes?

What a gracious God, for He forgives us our sins for Jesus' sake -- yes, *all* our sins. But the gift of forgiveness is neither a license to laziness nor an invitation to neglect God's will. In fact, as God's forgiven children we want to live according to His commands. But how shall we get the strength to do the things God wants?

Let's turn to our gospel. **"Listen to the Faithful Advent Preacher!"**

Some came to hear John the Baptist, expecting him to praise them. "Look at us! We're special! We're Abraham's children! Just look at how much better we are than others!" But John warned, **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire"** (verses 7-9).

Farmers would set the stubble on fire after the harvest to prepare the field for sowing next year's crop, and snakes hiding in the stubble would slither out to flee the advancing flames. These self-righteous hypocrites, offspring of the ancient evil Serpent, the devil, were slithering out now as John preached. But would they escape the fire of God's judgment? Not if they claimed, "God won't damn us. We're descendants of Abraham!" Why God could make the stones into descendants of Abraham if He wanted! Not if they refused to repent of their sin. Faith is like a tree. When it's real trust in God's salvation, it will produce the fruit of good works. But God was standing over them, with his ax poised about to strike at their roots!

What Christ calls for is faith in Him and what He did on the cross, not pride in some earthly affiliation! It must make God sad when His children are tempted to boast about their position in society, or in the church, or about the faith of their parents or grandparents, or when they trust that membership in the right church will somehow save them. Perfecting the church organization so that everything runs smoothly, embellishing worship to a polished art form, building and maintaining imposing church buildings, using new styles of music, good and helpful as some of these things may be as worship aids, they are no substitute for crucifying the sinful flesh daily by repenting of sin, for trusting like a little child, "Christ died for me; therefore God has forgiven all my sin;" or for sincere love for Christ and enthusiastic devotion to the Savior's cause as the fruits of faith! It isn't easy or pleasant to recognize the ax of God's judgment ought to strike each one of us because of our sinful nature and its inborn pride. By God's grace may the Holy Spirit lead us to repent of hypocritical self-righteousness when we hear the faithful Advent preacher today!

Then, to whom shall we turn to save us from our sin? Some of the people were wondering whether John might possibly be the Savior since his preaching was so powerful and popular. He answered, (v. 16) **"I baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** While John baptized with water, by which the Holy Spirit gave repentance and faith, the Messiah would pour out the Holy Spirit directly on His apostles. To separate the wheat from the chaff in those days, oxen would first of all step on the grain on a threshing floor. Then the farmer used a large shovel to toss the grain mixed with chaff up into the air. The wind blew the chaff aside, and the grain fell to the floor. John's Advent message and baptism prepared people for the Lord Jesus, who alone can look into hearts to separate the wheat from the chaff, gathering His believers into heaven, and casting the unbelievers into the unquenchable, never-ending suffering of hell.

To whom shall we turn to save us from our sin? Some expect political leaders, some expect popular heroes the world admires, some expect scientists, and some expect popular TV preachers - the ones who write all kinds of books and get invited to the White House – will somehow save them. Friends, Jesus alone has saved you from your sins. God's almighty Son became man to die your death to take away your sin. Through the

gospel He gives us His Holy Spirit to give us the faith to believe that God in mercy has forgiven all our guilt, past, present, and future, for Jesus' sake. Listen to the Advent preacher. Cling to God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus.

**“What should we do then?”** That’s what the people asked John, and He replied, **“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘What should we do?’ ‘Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’ He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay.’”**

What shall we do as we believe in Jesus our Savior? Think how bountifully God has blessed us. Share with others and be especially generous in supporting something like the WELS Committee on Relief or Humanitarian Aid fund, by which your acts of charity also build a bridge for our WELS missionaries so spread the gospel. Pray and witness and give so that many more may see the salvation of our God. The Lord didn’t ask the tax collector or soldier to quit their jobs, but to honor the Lord in their daily tasks. Let’s dedicate all our work to Jesus’ service. Be honest and fair in our dealings with others at work and business. With the Holy Spirit’s power be a trustworthy employee, good citizen, a faithful neighbor, a chaste and respectable single person, a pious husband, a devoted wife, a Christian parent, a dutiful son or daughter, a serious and responsible student, all to your Savior's glory!

But some people want to live it up, thinking they’ll regret living the life of a faithful Christian. Have you ever had any regrets in life? We need not hide our feelings from one another. These are the regrets I have, and they have nothing to do with missing out on any fun in life. I regret the times my love for God or those He has brought into my life grows lukewarm. Sure, I regret not being a better son, husband, parent, and pastor. How I regret the energy I at times spend and waste on things that will not last. How I regret the sinful desires that creep into my heart from time to time. I regret the times I’ve followed the crowd, or desired comfort and convenience and neglected the needs of others. I regret relaxing when I should have been working, and working when I should have been resting my soul and body. I regret trying to do too many things by my power and not by the strength of the Lord.

Yet I also know that the Lord still has given me time to do the things I won’t regret. I will never regret confessing my sins to Jesus. I will never regret hearing the Gospel or receiving the Lord’s Supper and believing God has forgiven me because Jesus lived, died, and rose for me. May the Lord give me the grace not to regret the times He must humble me to keep me from loving the things of this world and never to regret learning from my mistakes and letting their pain or shame drive me to the cross and love of Christ. I will never regret taking valuable moments to listen to Him, to think about Him, to trust Him, and to love Him above all else and to serve Him by loving others enough to tell them about their Savior too. These are the things we’ll never regret as we listen to the faithful Advent preacher and 1) Repent of hypocritical self-righteousness; 2) Cling to God's grace in Jesus; and 3) Live to honor Jesus. Amen.