

“Bear Fruit Worthy of Repentance”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 4, 2016

Matthew 3: 1-12

I’ve been spending a lot of time in my yard the last month or so. For ten months of the year, it’s great living in a house with lots of trees. For two months of the year, it’s a pain. Normally, one of my neighbors coordinates with a landscape company to come and remove our leaves, and I pay my neighbor to have that done. By the beginning of November, I hadn’t heard anything from my neighbor, and I assumed he wasn’t doing that this year. So, I began bagging up my leaves. I have a feeling when it’s all said and done, I will have put out 80-90 bags of leaves this fall. Of course, it was in the midst of doing this one day that my neighbor walks over and says he’s having his removed early-December. Ugh.

I’ve used all sorts of tools and devices to collect these leaves: a rake, a blower, a lawn mower, a yard vacuum that mulches, my hands. It’s a process that at one moment is tiresome and another moment is rewarding. It’s tiring to see the yard covered over with leaves after I spent the previous day cleaning everything up. But it’s rewarding to see the trees slowly emptying themselves of their leaves, and to know that soon – hopefully – there won’t be anything else left to clutter the ground. And for me, at least, I need projects like that to help me have a sense of accomplishment: it’s personally rewarding to see a completed end result.

And as I spent hour upon hour cleaning up our yard, I couldn’t help but think of how that process paralleled life. Our lives get messy, cluttered, covered-up with things that prevent our true selves from being seen. It could be unhealthy habits or practices. It might be troubling relationships we find ourselves in. It might be misaligned priorities. Whatever it is, our true selves can’t be seen until we take steps to clean out the clutter. It’s something that we are constantly doing, through all the seasons of our lives. But it’s what we are called to constantly do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It’s certainly what John the Baptist calls us to do on this Second Sunday of Advent. John always shows up around this time in our preparations for Jesus’ birth. He looks and smells funny, wearing a coat made out of camel’s hair and eating wild honey and locusts (Matthew 3:4). And his message of repentance and judgment toward the Jewish leaders feels quite counter-cultural to our modern-day desire to seek joy and happiness in this holiday season. But, just as the leaves need cleaning up every fall, we too need to hear John’s message every Advent calling us to realign ourselves with God’s purposes. For without that message, we may never truly grasp the depth of why God sent his Son into this world on our behalf.

One of the things we discussed Tuesday in our Advent Bible Study was the multitude of images that are present in this morning's passage. We hear of "the ax lying at the root of the trees," and of a winnowing fork being used to clear out the chaff from the wheat (3:10,12). Just like leaves that must be cleared from a yard, these tools are used to remove the clutter or unyielding plants, so that new growth might occur. And this clutter won't just be put in bags by the street: for every tree that doesn't bear fruit and all the chaff that is left "will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:12).

Another image that is prominent in this passage is that of wilderness. From the beginning we hear that John is preaching his message of repentance "in the wilderness of Judea," while other translations describe the setting as a desert (New International Version, 3:1). This image of the wilderness recalls Israel's past, when the people escaped slavery in Egypt but spent forty years in the Sinai desert, and when Israel was taken away into exile in Babylon. In those times of wilderness wanderings, God spoke to his people through Moses, Aaron, and the prophets, calling on the people to prepare for God's coming reign. John's message in the wilderness mirrors the Old Testament prophets: "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said: 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"'" (3:3).

John wants his hearers – then and now – to get ready, for what God is about to do. Clean out the clutter, get your priorities in line, and don't follow the paths of others who would steer you further away from God's purposes. Too often, we hear "repentance" and we immediately think of shame and judgment. For some, that has been their religious experience in the past. At its heart, though, repentance is about re-turning to God, realigning ourselves with God's purpose for our life. This time of Advent is a time to examine all that is in our life, what is life-giving and what is life-taking. Then, we are to realign ourselves with God's love that we know in Jesus Christ.

While John's words may seem harsh and raw, they are said out of love for God's people. Throughout Israel's times in the wilderness, despite God's struggles with their unfaithfulness, God never let go of them, never stopped loving them. God brought them out of those wildernesses into a new life of promise. Now, in the wilderness of Judea, John is telling his followers that there is someone who will come after him that won't just baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:11). And this one has been sent by God because God cherishes his people, and wants us to be responsible in how we prepare for this gift that is being given to us. "Get ready," John says, "for God's kingdom has come near."

John Burgess describes it like this: *What John – and Advent – remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord with Christ's life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image. For Matthew, John's strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the*

gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmastime are not all wrong, they fail to capture the full picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh (John Burgess, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville,

© 2010: 46).

I know – we don't want to hear about repentance and change in this happiest of seasons. "That's too much work, Frank. Let us just bask in the memories of Christmases past, of all those warm fuzzies, and we'll get around to all that realignment when the new year starts."

That's fine and all, and you can go down that road of denial. But there's another image in this passage that reminds us we have already been transformed in Christ's image, and that is the image of baptism. John reminds us that this one whom God is sending will baptize God's people with the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, we are dead to our old way of thinking, and alive to the new life God has promised in Emmanuel, God with us. If you have been claimed by the waters of baptism, then God calls you to be accountable in how you live in response to this incredible gift of love.

John says: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (3:8). That phrase does not just mean do good works or be morally upright. That command implies that the fruit we bear reflects our acknowledgement that we have re-turned to God, that we have allowed God to transform us in the image of Christ, and that we will be guided by our repentance to shine God's light in this world.

What does bearing fruit worthy of repentance look like for you? Is it acknowledging that your priorities have been out of whack, that the choices you have made do not build you or others up in healthy ways? In recognizing that, do you make specific changes in how you spend your time or resources, and in so doing you show others what it means for you to bear fruit worthy of repentance?

Or is it realizing that you haven't been real about your faith – with others, with God, with yourself? In realizing that, do you delve deeper into Scripture, or make stronger commitments to church, or consider how your actions outside of Sunday morning witness to others the faith you profess in God's Son, Jesus Christ? In doing so, do you show others what it means for you to bear fruit worthy of repentance?

As we continue our Advent journey, the Baptist is calling out from the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." In our individual lives and in our life as the church, may we seek to constantly realign ourselves with God's purpose for us, so we might bear fruit that is truly worthy of repentance.

Thanks be to God. Amen.