



#### LESSONS

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20  
ISAIAH 12:2-6 (6)  
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7  
ST. LUKE 3:7-18

#### PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP THE WILLS OF  
YOUR FAITHFUL PEOPLE,  
LORD GOD, AND OPEN  
OUR EARS TO  
THE PREACHING OF  
JOHN, THAT, REJOICING  
IN YOUR SALVATION, WE  
MAY BRING FORTH THE  
FRUITS OF REPENTANCE;  
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,  
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,  
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS  
WITH YOU AND THE  
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,  
NOW AND FOREVER.  
AMEN.

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Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday of Advent  
Date: December 13, 2009  
Sermon Title: Christ-like Integrity

*Faith, integrity;  
Prepare the way of the Lord.  
Amen. Come, Lord Christ.*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the peculiarities of the lectionary system we use – that is, the set of assigned Bible lessons for each Sunday – is that during every Advent season, we get two weeks in a row of John the Baptist. Last week we studied the “Get ready for John the Baptist” lessons. We read the Isaiah text that provides a background for understanding John, and we heard that at the heart of his ministry was the proclamation of a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sin. This week, we get a specific look at what that ministry was like. Primarily, it is John’s responsibility to get people ready for Jesus. It is John’s responsibility to point people to Jesus.

A professor at Luther Seminary, Marc Kolden, claims to have seen John once. As he tells the story, he and his wife had gone out for an evening drive shortly before Christmas. They had clipped a newspaper column describing the best displays of Christmas lights on homes in the Minneapolis / St. Paul area. Following its directions, they drove for over three hours in lightly falling snow through dozens of neighborhoods, oohing and aahing over light displays of everything from manger scenes (complete with moving shepherds and wise men) to Christmas trees and camels, Rudolph, Santa Claus and all the reindeer spread across the roof of rambler homes, and choirs of angels broadcasting Christmas music. He describes it as: “at times inspiring, often excessive, frequently corny, full of nostalgia but also of hope, the displays left us pretty much overwhelmed by the time we turned toward home.”

They stopped to look at the newspaper list one last time and discovered they had missed one—the home with the most lights of all. Since it was only a mile away they decided they'd better see it. As they got close to the street, traffic was backed up for some distance, and although it was now past 10:00 P.M., at the far end of that street the light was so bright it looked like high noon. Slowly they made their way toward the goal, frequently having to stop as the cars ahead took in all the splendor. Finally, they were just one house away, stopped in front of a quite small home next door to the massive display. The small house was dark except for a single string of perhaps thirty lights, hung in the shape of an arrow pointing toward the extravaganza next door. They laughed and laughed, and then thought of John the Baptist, who “came to witness to the light, so that all might believe....He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” The ironic simplicity of that arrow on the small house, and its slightly mocking tone, reminded him of the ministry of John, as he pointed to the coming Christ.<sup>i</sup>

John’s role is to prepare people for the coming of Christ. This week’s Gospel lesson focuses on that, but it is a surprising focus. John declares to the people that if they are depending on their ancestor Abraham to get into heaven, it isn’t going to work for them. Nobody will be grandfathered in because of their pedigree. No, repentance is the key. Those who repent, and begin to show signs of repentance in the way they live, will

<sup>i</sup> Professor Marc Kolden, writing on [www.WorkingPreacher.org](http://www.WorkingPreacher.org) “Christmas Preaching in a Contemporary Context.” ([http://www.workingpreacher.org/preachingworship.aspx?article\\_id=289](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preachingworship.aspx?article_id=289))



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God’s work. Our hands.

inherit eternal life. Those who don't repent, will be cut down and destroyed like so many weeds in a wheat field. It is an especially harsh message. John is basically telling the people that their lives show evidence of hearts that are a long ways away from God. We wouldn't have been the least bit surprised if the people had rebelled against John, and tried to throw him off the side of a cliff.

But their reaction is quite different from what we might have imagined. Luke tells us that their hearts were filled with expectation, they began to wonder if John himself was the Messiah, and they responded with one voice, saying: "What then should we do?" They assumed he was right, they were convinced of their own sinfulness, they began to desire repentance, and they immediately asked John what they could do to get started.

John's response to them is a very curious one. You might have expected him to walk them through the four spiritual laws. You might have expected him to pull out the worship folder, and lead them in the "Confession and Forgiveness" rite. You might have expected him to convince them that they needed to choose Jesus for their personal Lord and Savior. However, he does none of these (even though that is what Peter did, for the most part, when they crowd asked him the same question in Acts 2:37). Instead, John gives them these three pieces of simple, practical, concrete, ethical advice:

- To the crowds (most of whom were probably poor): "Share what you have with those who need it."
- To the tax collectors: "Be honest with your work."
- To the soldiers: "Don't take advantage of your power."

In other words, John commands his listeners to be Christ-like in the way they live their lives. He doesn't call them to an unobtainable level of discipleship. He doesn't call them to live lives of perfection. He calls them to simple, practical, concrete expressions of faithfulness and integrity. Share your possessions; be honest at work; don't take advantage of your power. Perhaps John realizes that as they begin to live in these Christ-like ways, they will be more likely to see Christ when he comes to them.

I've been reading a book, lately, called "unChristian." It is about non-Christians, and their impressions of the Christian church. I'll have to admit that when I purchased the book, I thought it was going to be about the unChristian character of people who don't believe in Jesus. I thought it might help me to better understand people who had rejected the church and the faith (in other words, people who are unChristians), and give me some ideas about how we could reach out to them.

I quickly became aware, though, that this wasn't exactly the focus of this book. Because it isn't about the unChristian people who have rejected the church and the faith. Instead, it is about the unChristian people who make up the church these days, and how their values and choices seem inconsistent with the faith they claim to embrace. The full title of the book is, "unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters." It is a strong challenge for those of us who make up the church today; for those of us whom Jesus has called to share the Gospel with the entire world. To many young Americans who are not part of the church, today's Christians seem to be "hypocritical," "insensitive," and "judgmental." If we are going to help them see that the church is not the farce that they think it is, we will have to let the character of our lives convince them otherwise. Perhaps a good start would be to pick up where John leaves off this morning: share your possessions; be honest at work; don't take advantage of your power. To the degree that we can show them how our faith in Jesus Christ has called us to live lives of faith and integrity, we may be able to help them see that the church can be much more than what they have imagined it to be.

Here at Saint Peter we have declared our mission to be a people of God who are welcomed into God's love, just as we are, and who are sent into God's world to be a reflection of Christ's love. Our hope is to offer a radical welcome to the world around us. A welcome into the life of this congregation for sure, but more importantly: a welcome into the grace of God that we know in Jesus Christ. To be effective in this mission we don't need to be theological experts. We don't need to be Biblical scholars. We don't need to be brilliant public speakers who can lead thousands to the altar. We don't need to be adventuresome missionaries who find a calling in a distant land. We simply need to be the kind of people John the Baptist calls us to be: people who share our possessions; who are honest at work; and who don't take advantage of our power.

John offers these simple, practical, concrete expressions of faith as the best way for us to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ into our lives. Perhaps they are also the best way for us to share our faith with the world around us. May the faith and integrity of our lives become a warm and gracious invitation to others into the love and grace that we have received from God.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

**Gospel Lesson; English Text:** <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>3:7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" <sup>13</sup> He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. <sup>iii</sup>

**Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:**

<sup>3:7</sup> Ἐλεγεν οὖν τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις χλοῖς βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ· γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς; <sup>8</sup> ποιήσατε οὖν καρποὺς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας καὶ μὴ ἄρξησθε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς· πατέρα χομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν τι δύναται ὁ θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ. <sup>9</sup> ἤδη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ῥίζαν τῶν δένδρων κείται· πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. <sup>10</sup> Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ χλοὶ λέγοντες· τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν; <sup>11</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ λεγεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ χων δύο χιτῶνας μεταδότω τῷ μὴ ἔχοντι, καὶ ὁ χων βρώματα ὁμοίως ποιείτω. <sup>12</sup> ἦλθον δὲ καὶ τελῶναι βαπτισθῆναι καὶ εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτόν· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσωμεν; <sup>13</sup> ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· μηδὲν πλέον παρὰ τὸ διατεταγμένον ὑμῖν πράσσετε. <sup>14</sup> ἐπηρώτων δὲ αὐτόν καὶ στρατευόμενοι λέγοντες· τί ποιήσωμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς; καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· μηδένα διασεισητε μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε καὶ ἀρκείσθε τοῖς ὄψωνίοις ὑμῶν.

<sup>15</sup> Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ διαλογιζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἰωάννου, μήποτε αὐτὸς εἴη ὁ χριστός, <sup>16</sup> ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων πᾶσιν ὁ Ἰωάννης· ἐγὼ μὲν δατι βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς· ἔρχεται δὲ ὁ ἰσχυρότερος μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἱκανὸς λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ· αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ. <sup>17</sup> οὗ τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ διακαθαῖραι τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συναγαγεῖν τὸν σίτον εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην αὐτοῦ, τὸ δὲ χυρὸν κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἄσβεστω. <sup>18</sup> Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ τερα παρακαλῶν εὐγγελιζέτο τὸν λαόν. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 3:7-18, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Luke 3:7-18, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).