

## John 3:7-18

<sup>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.

## **John 3:7-18, 3<sup>rd</sup> Advent, 2015**

Last week in our Gospel lesson we hear about John's ministry and this week we hear about John's message,

And he opens with, "You brood of vipers...!"

Normally you would figure that John was addressing the Scribes from the Temple or the Pharisees at this point,

but it is the crowds of people who have come out to the river to be baptized!

Now this doesn't sound like a very good sales strategy to me if he is trying to win the hearts of the people for the one who is soon coming behind him to bring salvation into the world.

You remember last week the closing verse said,

"...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

That is supposed to be good news.

John works the crowd up into a frenzy;

Who told about the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!

I don't want to hear anything about being descendants of Abraham, that isn't going to help you now!

If that is what God wanted he would create them out of these stones!

**GOD WANTS SOMETHING DIFFERENT!**

And is doing something different!

John gets the crowd's attention. They are scared and want to know what they are supposed to do.

John tells the crowd "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

John says be kind to one another.

There are a couple of groups lifted out of the crowd who asked the same question, "What should we do, then?"

The first is the tax collectors and you all know that they were pretty much hated by the general population because the taxes they collected went to the Roman Government,

and because many of them were not above collecting much more than they were entitled to and pocketing the extra.

The other group was soldiers.

Conjecture has it that these were not Roman soldiers but mercenaries.

Roman soldiers had rules to follow, and in a territory like Galilee and the others where Rome had conquered and was occupying,

the goal was to keep the peace. They wouldn't be going around extorting money from the people,

and creating more reason for them to revolt.

Mercenaries on the other hand would do that sort of thing to put a little extra money in their pockets.

So, John tells the tax collectors to collect no more than prescribed, and to the soldiers he said do not extort money by threats and false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages.

Tax collectors, be honest, and soldiers, do your work for your pay and quit being bullies.

Be kind, be honest and work hard--these are the fruits that are worthy of repentance.

That may seem like an over simplification of what repentance looks like,

but it does stand in tall contrast to the lives these people who came to the river were living.

You may be tempted to ask, “Is that really all you have to do?”

For John the answer is yes, it is that simple.

Honesty, Kindness, Hard work.

In his notes on this gospel lesson David Lose recalls a brief segment of the Today Show about what values we want to teach our kids.

In the poll they cited honesty topped the charts followed by kindness and then a strong work ethic.

Things don't change much do they? Even over the hundreds of years there are some truths that are constant.

This is important to us

But the point John is getting to as he delivers his warning about the end times and the people's preparation for them,

and announces the expectation of the coming messiah,

all this to prepare the way for Jesus,

is that everything looks different in light of the coming Christ.

Jesus' coming affects every dimension of life.

The way we live our lives can witness to the coming of God's kingdom in the coming of Jesus when we live like it is already here,

like we believe the kingdom is really coming in the end times,

and like we think it actually matters.

What would it look like if we went out from here looking for opportunities to be honest, kind and hardworking?

What if we believed acts of grace are within the reach of ordinary people and went out seeking opportunities to be honest, kind and hard working?

What if we believe—and acted on that belief—that being honest, kind, and hardworking really makes a difference in a culture that is impatient and fearful,

in a world that is afraid random acts of violence can and will happen at any time, in any place, on any street corner.

Fear causes us to change our habits, how we live and typically in a negative way.

When we change our lives in response to fear we risk forgetting who we are and what we value.

So what if we not only believed, but went out into our community in light of our fear,

in light of the dangers we perceive,

and doubled our efforts to be honest, kind and hardworking,

meeting the needs of others, helping those who struggle,

and in all these ways witness to our confidence that the coming of Jesus celebrated at Christmas,

the coming of Christ in the end times,

the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ does make a difference?

The world would be a little better place to live in then wouldn't it.

Last week during Wednesdays Together Kellie and Susan took our middle school youth out into the community,

actually to Chick File and the park on Airport Rd. and they carried out what I would call intentional acts of kindness among random people

by giving them a little bag of Hersey's Kisses and a candy cane and a card with our church name on it, and wished them a Merry Christmas.

I talked with Susan and learned that for some of them it wasn't easy.

How do you go up to a perfect stranger and do an act of kindness? Sounds pretty scary.

For others it was easier.

**I am looking forward to having conversation with them about how the people reacted.**

But, I have to believe that any acts of kindness, whether intentional or random have to make our world a better place to live in.

They make our children more honest, kind and hard working.

They make our church more vibrant and animated by John's conviction that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

There are no small acts of either random or intentional kindness and honesty.

They all make a difference in the world particularly when they are caught up in the faith that in the coming and the presence of Jesus,

God has drawn near to shower all of us and all those for whom we do acts of kindness

with the good news of grace, mercy and redemption.

Thanks be to God. Amen