

Second Sunday in Advent

BEING GOOD

Matthew 3: 1-12

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

1In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."3This 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.'" 4Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do not presume 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. 10Even 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. 11'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

DIAGNOSIS: Doing the Right Things for the Wrong Reasons

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Looking Good*

The Pharisees and Sadducees were just trying to do the right thing. After all, if the common folk had caught on to John's trendy call to repent, surely they'd better get in on the action. How offensive then, that John calls them a "brood of vipers" (v. 7)! They just wanted to do what was right-even if it was only to look good. And how different are we from them? We want to look good too-even if our motives are questionable.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Hiding Bad*

A more serious problem is lurking under the surface of the Pharisees (and our) repentance. While they do what's right (for the wrong reasons), they ignore the sin that is yelling for their and God's attention: That is, they want to determine their own destiny; they want to be accountable only to themselves, and not to some grasshopper-eating pious prophet-or, for that matter, to God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Being Bad*

A life that ignores God's sovereignty is a bad life. It's a life for snakes-not humans, hence John calls these religious pretenders "vipers." Seeking repentance and baptism-but not because they recognize their need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God-means their lives are devoid of the single most defining relationship: God and us. In other words, these "good looking" religious leaders are godless. And godless people are irredeemable-not even John's baptism can remove that verdict ("unquenchable fire," v. 12).

PROGNOSIS: Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reason

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Being Good*

Now, turn your attention to a “more powerful” one (v. 11), whose baptism not only forgives the unforgivable, but refines the hell out of the most religious pretenders. This powerful one has a name: Jesus (who saves). He knows how to separate out chaff and wheat-but he does it, not to distinguish between good and bad, but to make all good. Not that they are good, notice, but that Jesus makes them good. He gives himself, flesh and blood-through the cross to the hopeless cause of righteousness seekers (who look good on the outside, but are hiding the bad) and makes them truly righteous. That’s what makes him more powerful than John. By being uncompromisingly generous, he shows the world what good really looks like.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Finding Good*

Imagine finding such good-not by digging inside ourselves, but by looking outward to Jesus. And, what’s more, finding that such goodness is his free gift to us. Then, while you are standing with your mouth slack and your hands open in wonder, this goodness is laid in your hands (isn’t that the nature of baptism and holy communion?). This is how Christ’s good is found: Christ seeks out those in need of it, and gives it. And so we are found and, thus, find good.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Doing Good*

Being found good in Christ, gives foundlings like us a reason to pay attention to the world God has done this good for. If it was worth Christ’s life, it’s certainly worth our attention. Not because we want to look good, but because we want this world that God loves to be better. And that’s good.