

Second Sunday of Advent

CHRIST'S CROSS BEARS GOOD FRUIT

Matthew 3:1-12

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Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

In 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 axe 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: Rotten Fruit Gets the Axe

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We Bear Rotten Fruit*

When the people of Jerusalem and all Judea confessed their sins, what were they confessing? "I'm sorry I hit my sister. I'm sorry I yelled at my boss. I'm sorry I didn't let that widow garner grain from my field. I'm sorry I didn't share my lunch with the dirty, hungry orphan looking at me from behind the shed." But what made them think such things were wrong? What made them understand the idea of John's command to repent? Why does the word "repent" even exist? What made John think that people needed to turn around (repent)? Turn from what, to what? Who was giving directions? Whether the source is known or not ("They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness" [Rom. 2:15]), God is giving directions with God's law. All that confessing was done out of fear that they needed to straighten up or else. (The law states what is right, accuses us of not doing it, judges, and then punishes.) That confessing was done trusting that if they looked good, if they behaved right, then their relationship with God would be good. The law would then be on their side.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *We Cannot Turn Around*

Did anyone confess, "I cannot possess true fear of God and true faith in God?" Did anyone confess that the reason the kingdom of God was not there was because of them? The Pharisees and Sadducees felt that they did not have to. They had Abraham as

their ancestor (v. 9). People have reasons why they feel they don't need to repent. Either they think they meet the law's demands, or they are too afraid to say they need to repent. After all, this kingdom of God that was coming, was it just more of the law?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Kingdom of the Axe*

When God and God's kingdom are known only as law, the approaching nearness of God's kingdom is not good news. The apostle Paul calls the law a ministry of condemnation, and he calls it a ministry of death (2 Cor. 3:7-9). The kingdom of God was coming near-condemnation and death, like an axe at the root of tree that will cut down the bad and throw it away.

PROGNOSIS: Christ's Cross Bears Good Fruit

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Kingdom of God Is Jesus on a Cross for Us*

Condemnation and death are ever present. So what a strange but logical turn of events to learn that the kingdom of God comes near in the baby Jesus, in a stable because there was no room for him in a world ruled by condemnation and death. Equally predictable is that Jesus was seen as bad because he forgave, because he gave mercy, because he welcomed and ate with the condemned. Jesus also was seen as bad because he claimed he was God. Therefore, following the directions of the law, the axe cut him down and he was thrown away into a tomb. But now the winnowing fork is in his hand! He lives! He lives to gather his wheat into his granary! Now this is the kingdom of heaven! And it is here! Immanuel! God is with us in Jesus-who keeps company with us, the condemned, in order to change the verdict!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Are Turned*
Repentance is to turn from the law to Jesus, from accusation to suffering, from condemnation to forgiveness, and from death to

life. Jesus baptizes us with his Holy Spirit who sets our hearts on fire with faith in Jesus and his promises for us. We confess that we did not trust God to be merciful, we did not trust God to be with us to help us. We turn to God whose son died for us. Yes, surely God is trustworthy.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Bear the Fruit of Repentance*

As we have been turned to Jesus, as we trust God is with us in Jesus, we get to bear the fruit of repentance, the fruit of trusting Jesus. When we are accused, condemned, we trust Jesus to countermand with mercy. We are free to bear the fruit of mercy instead of using the law to accuse others. We are free to bear the fruit of forgiveness instead of condemnation. We are free to bear the fruit of hope even when we can see no solution to our problems, even when we see no solution to suffering and death. We hope for life in the midst of death. And as we work, do our jobs, work in the home, we bear the fruit of repentance that such work is our service to God, that there is no greater service, which is the fruit of faith in Jesus' forgiveness, faith in Jesus to give us peace with God in all we do. For here, as we take out the garbage, feed the hungry, stand up for others who need care, we gather others into the kingdom of God that is now here.