

# Third Sunday of Advent

## THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'

Luke 3:7-18

### Third Sunday in Advent

#### Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

7 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? 8 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. 9 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."

10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 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."

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 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. 17 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.”

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Abraham as Our Ancestor (v. 8)*

It’s so tempting to rest on our laurels. We’d love to be able to count past victories as if they could pay for our future errors, or to believe that our connections are enough. The Jews who came out to the wilderness would have liked to do that—to rest on the fact that Abraham was their ancestor, so all was right with God. But they knew better.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Brood of Vipers (v. 7)*

In fact that is precisely why they were willing to subject themselves to the discomforts of this wilderness setting and its preacher: They knew they couldn’t rest on their religious laurels. John makes that clear when he immediately dispenses with their claims to privileged ancestry and calls them a brood of vipers. All is not right with the world; John’s audience is proof of that. They are tax collectors, soldiers and any variety of sinners who have selfishly held onto things that were never theirs in the first place: More coats, food, money, and comfort than they had a right to. Their relationship to the world was tenuous. But their greed only pointed to their still more tenuous relationship with God. They were frauds.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Wrath to Come v. 7*

And John minces no words telling them so. In fact, he makes the

ghastly claim that God could just as soon raise up stones to be children of Abraham. In other words, God doesn't need them to get his work done on earth (v. 9). In fact, just so they make no mistake about the immediacy of the threat that hangs over their heads, John tells them that the "axe is lying at the tree"; their fruitless lives are expendable (v. 9).

## **PROGNOSIS: THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *More Than Water & Forgiveness*

But wait. John has some good news too (v. 18): He doesn't get the last word in this operation. As a matter of fact, for those who wondered whether John might be Messiah (v. 15), John answers squarely that he is not. Instead, there is one who is more powerful than he is (v. 16). That One gets the last word. He does that by subjecting his life to the hell fires we deserve and thus quenching the wrath that is to come. All so he can gather us (the wheat, v. 17) into God's granary as part of the harvest.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Baptized with the Holy Spirit & Fire, v. 16*

John's advent news about the coming Messiah is enough to give us former "brood of vipers" reason to pause. In fact, it inspires not just awe, but the greater response: repentance (v. 8). We are not worthy of such a gift. And yet we are grateful and relieved. So grateful, in fact, that we are inspired to bear the fruits worthy of repentance—to act in ways that demonstrate where we put our trust (not in ourselves, but wholly in the One who is more powerful). It's as if, Christ suffering the hell fires for us, refines us (v. 17)—turns us toward God and away from our own selfish purposes.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *What Then Should We Do? v. 10, 12, 14*

Christ shares more than a coat with us. He shares the benefits of eternal life—minus the wrath. His generous mercy is inestimable. Christ does what only he can do: Save us. So we, in turn, do what we can do (just like the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers with John that day). We share coats and food, (v. 10, 11); we gladly give up exploiting (v. 12) and extorting (v. 14). We live faithfully in the fiery light of the One who is more powerful than we are.