

Fruitless Repentance

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Today's third reading is the gospel reading from the lectionary. And in many liturgical traditions, congregations are encouraged to stand for the reading of the gospel. I'm not going to ask you to do that but I would like to ask you to make some kind of gesture of reference for this most sacred of all the readings. For you, that might be simply closing your eyes or covering your heart, or lifting a hand. Whatever your body is capable of doing and feels right for you as I do this reading, please do so.

Luke chapter 3 verses 7 through 18:

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.

So how about that for a reading. I'm going to let that simmer with you for a few minutes, and I have a what I think is kind of a fun reflection question for you. If you were a tree (imagine

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you're a tree) what type of tree would you be? And if that's a little too fruity or nutty for you...[laughter and jeers] you might prefer simply to think about trees and what your favorite type of tree is. Or maybe you have a favorite tree somewhere in the world. I saw a photographer on Instagram this week had posted about a 2019 calendar she put together that was 12 images of the same tree in Highland Park. You know the one with the big spreading branches? I thought that was cool. Maybe you have a favorite tree. So what type of tree would you be? What's your favorite tree? I have a favorite tree. It's a cherry tree that happens to be that cherry tree right out in the courtyard. That is a Montmorency cherry tree. It's a self-fruited cherry which means that it doesn't need anybody else to do its work. It can get it all done all by itself, which I think makes it a strong, independent tree [laughter] and I love it for that reason. And I love it because it was planted in memory of Artisan's church planting coach, the Reverend Dr. Larry Sherman, who died too early several years ago and we planted a tree in his memory. We got all the founding pastors of Artisan Church together, put that tree in the ground, and put a little plaque at the bottom of it. So it reminds me of Larry. I also love it because by the time winter ends in Rochester I am so done with winter and I'm just ready for some beauty and some sign of spring, and that tree is one of the first signs of spring every year. It has these beautiful little white blossoms that come out on it and then these beautiful red cherries which the kids come and pick and eat, and they're delicious and tart, really just a wonderful fruit.

Last year was the biggest crop we've ever gotten from that tree. I picked a whole bowlful off of it, a big bowl, for which I weighed out at about 11 pounds and then about a week later I came back and did it again. So that tree put off a lot of cherries last year, many of which my wonderful wife turned into a cherry pie, which was one of the highlights of the year for me. So I guess what I'm saying to you is that my favorite tree is a pie tree [laughter]. I don't know what your favorite tree is, but mine is a pie tree. So we'll talk more about fruit today, that's kind of the central point this morning. It is the third Sunday of Advent which means if you can believe it, we are past the halfway point in this season of expectation and preparation for Christmas, the coming of Christ. And one character who shows up every year, sometimes more than once a year, in the Advent readings is John the Baptist. I like to call him John the Baptizer so as to avoid any confusion with the Protestant denominations that are called Baptist, and that's in part due to the fact that I grew up in a Protestant denomination that was called the Church of the Nazarene, named for Jesus who was from Nazareth. Jesus was the Nazarene, so the Church of the Nazarene was the Church of Jesus. We always had a joke that John was a Baptist but Jesus was a Nazarene [laughter, some boos]. I didn't say it was a *good* joke, I just said we had a joke. So I prefer to call him John the Baptizer, an important character in the early parts of the gospels, these stories about Jesus, was seen as a prophetic figure fulfilling the prophets of Israel. John is the one they mentioned who's "a voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the

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way for the Lord,'" and John points us to the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. John is really something. I think of John sort of like the street preachers with the megaphone who yell at us. Have you ever seen the street preachers with the megaphones who yell at us [chuckles]? John's kind of like them. He wants to remind everybody that they're headed for big trouble if they don't straighten up and fly right. Did you catch the words in that reading? The first thing he said when these people came out to the wilderness? Now, somehow he managed to be charismatic enough to amass a crowd of people who wanted to come out to the edge of civilization and be baptized in a muddy river as a sign of their repentance, of their changing of their mind (that's what repentance means). And he's like, "OK glad the crowd is here. You brood of vipers! [laughter] Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And he got his preacher voice on like that [snaps]. He called them snakes right out of the gate. That's not probably the best way to keep a crowd for your sermon. He said to them, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance...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."

So as I was studying this passage this week I became quite fascinated by something that I noticed, which is that these specific groups of people who Luke mentions in the story as having come out to John for baptism and to ask him questions about what they should do, they are some of the same groups of people that Jesus ministers to again and again and again in the gospels. Did you notice that first of all, there's a crowd? Jesus had crowds with him all the time, so much that he had to sneak away from them sometimes. But specifically, Luke mentions among this crowd the tax collectors and Jesus had lots to say, about and to, tax collectors, didn't he? In fact one of the accusations about Jesus was that he spent too much time with them because they were corrupt and it was thought that he shouldn't be with them. Soldiers specifically mentioned. Jesus has some interesting interactions with soldiers, Centurions and other agents of the Roman Empire. Speaking of which, did you notice that we have a religious community that wants to find their identity in being descendants of Abraham? Not only their identity, but their salvation. And John tells them, "Good luck with that because God could make these rocks into the descendants of Abraham if God wanted to do that, so don't trust in that." And then we also have these two agents of the state — we have tax collectors and soldiers. Who was it that crucified Jesus in the end? We had the crowds calling for his head, the religious establishment bringing him before the political establishment which carried out the sentence of execution for being an enemy of the state. All of that is prefigured in this little account, this little encounter with John the Baptizer at the Jordan River. I thought that was very interesting.

By the way, this is not the sermon but I'll give you like this 30-second version of how dangerous and deadly the combination of religious fundamentalism and political nationalism are. When you mix those two things together, not that that would ever happen in our country [quiet

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laughter] how really dangerous that is. Luke is not afraid of naming names. I didn't get to it because it's one verse outside the assigned lectionary reading, but the very next thing that he starts talking about is Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by John the Baptist because of his wife, all the evil things that Herod had done. Luke's gospel, which is the one that we read at Christmas all the time, starts out like with the receipts: It's like, "In the age of this emperor, this ruler, this time..." He puts their names on the page. He's not afraid to specifically, by name, call out the political authorities in power at this time. Anyway, as I said, that's not the sermon but it was interesting to me. And what is the unifying idea that John gives in all of his responses to these questions from all of these people? Did you notice it? Everything he says has to do with wealth, possessions, or money. The crowd's asking, "What should we do?" and he says, "If you have two coats you should give one to someone who has none, and if you have extra food you should do the same thing." The tax collectors ask him, "What should we do?" and he says, "Well, here's a start. Don't collect more than you're supposed to. Don't skim off the top." The soldiers come to him and he says, "Guess what? Your job is don't extort people. Don't use the power of the sword to take money from people who are in need." It's almost as if this thirst for wealth and money and possessions and security is something that drags down every class of people. It's almost as if that's sort of a universal sin that we are all susceptible to. That's also not the sermon. But if you look at John the Baptizer's teaching, the point is you see all this foreshadowing not only in the interactions that Jesus will have with some of the same people that John interacted with but in some of the content of the messages, which is about caring for those who are oppressed and in need more often than anything else.

I want to spend a few minutes with this idea of fruit. That one key line really just leaps off the page to me. John says to these crowds of people right after calling them a brood of vipers, which means like a nest or a family of snakes, he says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." And he warns them, if you don't do this, if you don't bear fruits that are worthy of this repentance, the consequences are that you're going to be chopped up like firewood and burned up, or separated like the chaff from the wheat and burned up. Now because of some other imagery that we find in scripture, and even more than that, because of the nature and character and tone of so much revivalist preaching, we hear fire and we immediately connect that with punishment. But I want to tell you that in this account there is nothing to me that indicates punishment. What's indicated to me in this account is simply that if your life isn't bearing fruit, you sort of become like a tree that's not producing fruit anymore, or the part of the plant that isn't useful for food if it's talking about wheat. In either case, they're just separated out and burned up and they're gone. I'm not saying that's a rosy image but it's a little bit less drastic and dramatic than what we might instantly associate with, isn't it? The fear here is fruitlessness, it's futility and death, not necessarily punishment and pain. By the way, after all of this Luke says,

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“with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news.” Isn't that kind of funny to think? Why is all of this stuff about being burned up and thrown into the fire, why is that good news? Well, what if you were one of the people who got your taxes collected double? What if you were one of the poor citizens of Rome who had a soldier show up at your door one day with a sword saying, “How much money you got in that little purse there?” What if you were one of the class of oppressed and harmed people in the world? Is it then good news to think that those who are not bearing fruits worthy of repentance, those who are going down to the river to show off their religiosity on Tuesday and then on Wednesday are going back to the town and stealing, that those people might be cut off and burned up? It might be better news anyway.

But I want to kind of sit with this image of fruit for a while. Fruit is one of those images in this gospel that shows up again and again. I think it was 11 or 12 times that the word fruit shows up in Luke's gospel from the very first one, which is when the angel appears to Mary and says, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” which is the source of the Hail Mary prayer that Roman Catholics pray. Mary is next week, by the way. If you want more Mary talk we'll do that next week. That's the first mention of fruit and the last mention of fruit is the last supper when Jesus is in the room with his disciples shortly before his crucifixion and he says to them as he gives them the cup, “Drink of this all of you, for I am telling you I will never drink from the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom of God has come.” Those are kind of the bookend examples of fruit in Luke's gospel, and in the middle you have this one with John the Baptist and a lot of the teachings of Jesus where fruit becomes an important metaphor for spiritual health. Jesus sort of reiterates some of what John said. He said, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. You will know the tree by its fruit.” This cherry tree out in our courtyard is a beautiful, healthy, flourishing tree because it bears fruit. If it went five years and never gave us any more cherries I don't know that we would cut it down necessarily, but it would stop being the thing it was supposed to be. That would be pretty clear. “You will know the tree by its fruit.”

Jesus also has a very famous parable of the sower. Somebody plants seeds and they get scattered about in different types of soil, and some of the seeds get choked out, and some grow up and are kind of weak, and some grow up and they bear fruit. There's another parable that Jesus gives involving fruit that's about a gardener and I will talk about that one shortly. But the point is, when you see the word fruit in Luke's gospel you can think about the idea of a healthy and flourishing spiritual life. Sometimes that's a positive image and sometimes, as with John the Baptist here in Luke chapter 3, it's kind of negative. It's kind of alarming. It's very convicting. John says to them, listen, if your life isn't producing fruit that's worthy of the repentance that you are indicating you want to make, don't bother. Don't come down to this river wanting me

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to baptize you so that you can show all your friends that you're repentant if the fruit of your life is not worthy of actual repentance. It's a sermon against hypocrites, which we love. Don't we love sermons against hypocrites and say, "Go get those hypocrites, John. Nice job. I will forgive you for being a Baptist, you're doing so good!" [Laughter] Until you realize that you are also a hypocrite. That in some ways you are also making these outward signs of religiosity while inwardly you are profiting from your power and privilege. You're saying the right things and doing the right things, and maybe you're not claiming to be a son or a daughter of Abraham, but you are attending church and you've got the little fish on your car or whatever it might be. And you're still trampling on the poor with your life. Then it doesn't feel so good when John comes for the hypocrites, does it? So all this talk of fruitless trees being cut down and thrown into the fire. All this talk about how we might actually be the intended audience for John's sermon and some of Jesus' teaching, all this might be kind of hard to hear. Maybe it put you in the position of feeling a little bit worried that maybe you are in danger of being cut off and discarded, no longer being part of the fruitful kingdom that God wants for the world.

Maybe you've been kind of on the fringes of faith and you realize that you want your life to have more purpose and you think this might be it and you're getting ready to wade into the waters of the Jordan River, whatever that might metaphorically indicate for you in this place and time, but now you're worried that you won't measure up — that you're not bearing fruits worthy of that kind of repentance. Maybe there's lots of people in this category. Maybe you had a repentance experience a long time ago but it never really made much difference in the fruitfulness of your life, and you're starting to realize that and you're wondering if the whole thing was just a show. Maybe, and perhaps most painfully of all, you're reflecting on a time when your life did seem very fruitful, when your soul was healthy and alive and producing fruit. And that's painful for you because now it's been months and maybe even years since you had that experience, since you had that feeling, since you had the awareness that you were producing any fruit in God's garden. Maybe you're wondering if your soul will ever see another spring or if this spiritual winter is actually where things end for you and God. It's possible that you feel truly fruitless and that this is no fun to hear or think about. But I do have good news. There is good news for all of you, and it's not just the good news that was mentioned earlier in the passage. That's one thing, but this is even easier and better, I think, to receive.

There is one more mention of fruit, one more parable of Jesus that involves fruit in Luke's gospel. I didn't read it to you but I'll summarize it for you. It's from Luke Chapter 13. It's a parable of a gardener who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. I don't know if that's like a bad idea or the right thing to do. I'm not sure if fig trees belong in vineyards or not. I don't quite think it's the point of the story but it did make me wonder, "Maybe his problem is that he planted a fig tree in a vineyard" [laughter]. I'm sure there's a spiritual lesson you can draw from that too, but

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here is the point of the story. He planted this fig tree and it produced no fruit. Year one, no fruit. Year two, no fruit. Year three, no fruit. Three years he went back to this tree and got nothing from it. Three is an interesting number in the gospels, isn't it? Three years he went back to this tree and had no fruit. And he said to the gardener, "This tree is useless. Cut it down and and throw it in the fire, it's taking up space." And the gardener said, "Sir, no. Not yet. Let me dig around the outside of it a little bit and put some manure in there, let me fertilize it. In other words, let me take better care of it. Let me give it the attention that maybe it needs and let's give it one more year. And if after a year you come back and it still hasn't produced any fruit, then fine, you can cut it down. But maybe it will, and wouldn't it have been a shame to lose it?" What a beautiful story that is for those of us perhaps who are feeling fruitless and worthless, and like our best days are behind us, and like we have nothing left to offer the kingdom of God. Like we're right on the edge there of just being chaff, of just being a dead, fruitless tree. And the garden or says no, don't give up. Give it one more year. Tend it, fertilize it, care for it.

See, John is the straight up fire and brimstone preacher. He calls us to immediate repentance, he tells us flee from the wrath to come. He is like that megaphone preacher. He's like the revivalist preacher who encourages you to think about the fate of your everlasting soul if you should not make it home tonight. Have you ever been in that room? I've been in that room a few times. Sometimes — let's be honest — sometimes we need that kind of rhetoric. Sometimes we need that to shock us out of the stupor that we are in spiritually. That's John's M.O. Jesus is a little different. It's not that he never gets fiery with people. He does occasionally get fiery with people, particularly people who think they have everything together. Particularly people who have a view of themselves as religious experts. Jesus will go there with those people sometimes. But Jesus also gives us this picture of the gentle, patient gardener who simply wants their fig tree to produce fruit, to become everything it was meant to be. A picture of a gardener who wants the tree to live up to its potential to be a blessing to everyone around it. A picture of a gardener who not only wants that for the tree but is willing to give it time to make it happen. That is willing to care for the tree and tend it and prune it and fertilize it and water it and (do) everything that it needs. Remember that when Jesus speaks, when Jesus acts, when Jesus loves us in this way, Jesus reveals the heart of the Father. A lot of us have an image of God as like the blowtorch God, ready to just come after us. Jesus gives us this other picture of God as the gentle, patient, loving gardener caring for a tree that needs to bear fruit.

So this Advent season, we are just days away from the darkest day of the year. Which is really depressing except when you think about the fact that every day after that will be longer. But this dark season of the year, let us ponder not only the ways in which we might all be fruitless right now, the ways in which we might need to bear more fruit right now. But let us also ponder the fact that maybe we are in a winter and there's a spring on the way. And for those who need

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the fiery words of the prophet to shock us into action, well, you've got them. I read them to you there in the gospel, I didn't dodge that particular train. But some of you have heard quite enough of that, haven't you? Some of you have become quite wearied and worn down by that type of preaching and that type of rhetoric. Some of you, I'm sorry to say, have experienced something that probably qualifies as spiritual abuse using that type of language and rhetoric and your capacity to hear the John the Baptist fire and brimstone sermon right now is zero. For you, I give you the gardener whose patience with you gives you one more year, and one more year, and one more year. And whose skill in resurrecting that which is dead and fruitless is unparalleled and unending. May that be hope for you this Advent season. Amen.

In just a moment I'm going invite you to come and take communion if you wish. Artisan's communion table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place. You don't need to be a member of our church or any church. You can come to the table through these middle aisles and receive communion by taking a piece of bread and dipping in one of the cups. You can eat it right there at the table. May it be for you the real presence of Jesus the Savior, his body and blood broken for you, shed for the forgiveness of sins. May it be food for your weary and hungry spiritual soul and may it be an act of unity with each other and Christians around the world and throughout time who have partaken of this same sacrament.

One of the changes we've made to our liturgy during Advent is that we're doing the confession right before communion. And so this week it's the Confession of Sin from The Book of Common Prayer and as you prepare your hearts to receive the good grace of Jesus the savior Let's pray the words of that confessional prayer together [all reading]: *Most Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us. That we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.*

As the band leads us, our communion table is open now and for the rest of our service. And if you'd like to receive prayer from a member of our prayer team, that takes place in the back corner of the room. I encourage you to respond to the Spirit's voice in your life today. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com