

**Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room:  
Do You Bear Fruit?**

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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The Second Sunday of Advent

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I like this description of the unusual character in our text from Matthew:

*John the Baptist is a “call to worship” in the flesh—not a benign and cheery “Good morning,” but a real call to worship that shakes the cobwebs off the pews: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* (E. Boring, *NIB*, Vol. VIII, p. 159)

A call to worship in the flesh. And not just a cheery “good morning,” but a call to worship that shakes the cobwebs off the pews. That was John the Baptist. Now, let me say this. Some of us grew up with those calls to worship every Sunday morning. They were loud, urgent, and often manipulative. We were glad to leave them behind, and we don’t wish to go back, right? I’ve been there too.

Loud is just not necessary. The preacher needs to speak loudly enough to be heard, but that’s enough. Have you heard about a preacher who wrote notes to himself in the columns of his sermon? “Emphasize this,” he reminded himself. “Pause here.” One read, “Weak point. Shout!” I suspect that is true. Manipulation is never appropriate. The hearers should always be respected. I remember this little jingle I heard in a preaching class in seminary:

*Make ‘em laugh,  
Make ‘em cry,  
Get ‘em down the isle  
Before they know why.*

It happens! That’s manipulation, and it’s wrong.

But what about urgency? Is there a place for a sense of urgency in a progressive Baptist congregation like ours? We like things to be done with dignity and order, right? Well, let's see. If one of our children wandered away and was nearing a busy street, do you think we would respond with a sense of urgency? You bet we would! Robes would come tearing off, hymnals would be flying through the air, and we would be running to prevent a tragedy. If one of our senior adults suddenly sat down during the singing of a hymn and clutched his chest, do you think we would respond with a sense of urgency? Again, you bet we would! Some situations require urgency. Anything less fails to take that situation seriously.

John the Baptist, that call to worship in the flesh, did not step onto the biblical scene smiling and saying, "Good morning, y'all." No, he was filled with fire, and with the urgency of a frightened mother he called-out the people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Then he turned his attention to the most religious of his community—at least, outwardly they were—and called them a "brood of vipers." He described them as attempting to slither away from the judgment of God.

For John the Baptist, a child was about to walk into a busy street. A man was having a heart attack. It was time for urgency.

The season of Advent invites us to hear John's urgent message. Our tendency with our polite "good mornings" and "dignity and order" is to grow complacent, to lose the sense of urgency. So today John the Baptist stands before us and lifts an urgent voice: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

So what was John's problem with the Pharisees and Sadducees? Why did he call them a brood of vipers? Why did he accuse them of attempting to slither away from God's judgment? Verse eight is the answer, and this is the key to understanding this text. The Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to John to be baptized, and this is what he told them:

*Bear fruit worthy of repentance.*

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the respected religious figures of their day. They were the definition of “religious.” But John saw through their façade. He saw the disconnect between what they professed to be and what they actually were. They appeared to be religious figures, but they did not bear fruit, acts of kindness, justice, faithfulness, all those qualities that should be inherent in the life of faith. They wanted the title of Pharisee or Sadducee, but they did not embody the essence of the role.

John expected them to object and put up excuses. “We have Abraham as our ancestor,” he expected them to say, as if ancestry had bearing on how religious they were.

John knew something new was coming into the world. It was about more than lineage, who your parents and grandparents were. It was about true repentance, having hearts and minds so transformed by God’s goodness and grace that they would want to give that goodness and grace to others. When he looked at the Pharisees and Sadducees, he saw no such transformation. They were not bearing fruit. He saw instead the opposite: a brood of vipers.

Have any of you seen *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* yet? Kelly saw it. She wanted me to go with her, but I had heard a review on NPR. Oh, they said it is a really good movie. They also said it’s a movie to see if you want a really good cry. I wasn’t looking for a good cry, so I gracefully declined. But Kelly said it was excellent and that Tom Hanks does a great job as Fred Rogers.

I read about something that has sprung up alongside the movie, a movement, I guess it could be called. It’s called “Be a Neighbor” day, and people are encouraged perform acts of service. The guy who is organizing it said, “It could be as easy as learning your neighbor’s name, writing a letter, mowing your neighbor’s lawn, or even volunteering at your local food bank.”

Did you know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian clergyman? It’s true. He attended the Pittsburg Presbyterian Seminary and was ordained in 1963. He went on to get another degree in childhood development. Then with the help of a child psychologist, he developed a

children's TV show called *The Children's Corner*. Then came *Misterogers*. And then his classic *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, which ran for 33 years.

Here's something I really like about the Rev. Fred Rogers: he believed that teaching through example is as powerful as preaching.

He once said this. It's profound, and I think John the Baptist understood this:

*It's really easy to fall into the trap of believing that what we do is more important than what we are. Of course, it's the opposite that's true: What we are ultimately determines what we do!"*

That was the disconnect John saw in the Pharisees and Sadducees. That is why he called them a brood of vipers that was trying to slither away from the judgment of God. That's why his message was so urgent. The religious leaders of the day didn't "do" because they had never been transformed. They bore no fruit because they had not been transformed by the goodness and grace of God themselves.

For John the Baptist, the life of faith was not about family lineage. It was not something for show. John believed that in Jesus Christ God was doing something new, something of great significance. Our understanding of religion was changing. It's about who we are, who we "be." We are individuals transformed by the goodness and grace of God. Then out of our transformation, we do; we bear fruit. We give the goodness and grace of God to others.

So today we're given a gift. That unusual character, John the Baptist, stands before us as a call to worship in the flesh. He is shaking the cobwebs from these pews. Repent, he says. Wake up. Pay attention. Something important is happening. Please don't miss it. Let every heart be transformed. Then let every heart prepare him room by bearing fruit.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the urgent reminder from John the Baptist. Transform us by your goodness and grace. And then help us to show that goodness and grace to others. Amen.