

Sermon on Luke 3:7-18
Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So the gospel begins today with John the Baptist addressing the crowds which came to hear him and be baptized, with these words: *You brood of vipers!* *You bunch of snakes! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance! Do not begin to say to yourselves 'We have Abraham' as our ancestor'; for I tell you...every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

So, John the Baptist is not: "Minnesota Nice"! You probably wouldn't have wanted him as your parish pastor, but he makes a great prophet, because he wasn't afraid to take on the authorities of his time: the Pharisees and scribes, Priests and King Herod Antipas himself. He didn't mince words when he challenged the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew's gospel, and confronted King Herod for having taking his brother Philip's wife into his own house. But in Luke's gospel, John didn't just challenge the authorities, he spoke directly to the crowd which came to him for baptism, and called them "You brood of vipers!" And John warned them that God's judgment was upon them – it was coming – and any "tree" (or people) that didn't bear fruit would be cut down and burned.

The people who had come to John the Baptist were worried when he said this. "What then shall we do?" they asked. "If you have two coats, share one with another person who has none," John said. Tax collectors asked the same thing when they came to be baptized – and John told them to collect no more than the amount prescribed – in other words, be honest! Soldiers even came to John, and asked what they should do. "Don't extort money from anyone by threats, don't falsely accuse any one, don't bully or threaten people, and be satisfied with your wages." In other words, when John said to "repent", he meant literally for people to change their behavior, "turn around", and do good – the opposite of what they were presently doing.

I would call this the ultimate stewardship sermon, as given by John the Baptist. He was NOT asking for money or offerings – far from it! John was speaking directly to all the individuals who came to him, and confronted them with this challenge to change their behavior. He didn't just point to others – to Pharisees and scribes – and say how much "they" needed to clean up their act, and change *their* behavior. He looked directly at everyone who came to him, and said **YOU NEED TO CHANGE!** **YOU** need to bear fruit worthy of repentance! Not just say "I repent", be baptized, and then go on with "business as usual"! You

need to bear fruit as God calls you to bear fruit, for the good of all – to share what you have with others, and help others survive.

So, if I were to preach like John the Baptist, I might say something like this: You complacent gaggle of Lutherans! You are so “Minnesota Nice”! So you think that you are “saved by grace alone”, do you? Just because you are baptized, you have affirmed your baptism in confirmation, and you have your membership in a Word and Sacrament ministry, what makes you think that you are saved? “Faith without works is dead”, scripture says. And your “tree of faith” will be cut down if it does not bear fruit. So what fruit do you have to offer as a result of your faith?

If this worries you at all, then you may ask, “What then should we do?” You American Christians seem to not “want” for much- in fact, you seem to have plenty of everything that you need (although you do seem to worry a lot about whether you will have enough). But, as you are among the wealthiest nations in the world, and you Lutherans are among the most “middle class” of all church bodies, then it would not be a burden to share some of what you have! You have more than one coat, do you not? Well, then, share a coat, as you have at least two! And because you are comfortable economically, do not begrudge the taxes that you pay, or the tax levies requested by your local school district, for they are investments in the children and youth of this community – and thus, in their (and your) future! You may not be a tax collector yourself, or a tax advisor, but in all of your financial dealings, the fruit is in the honesty you show in all of your financial dealings. And in the amount you give as a donation to your community and the Church, to help build up this community and spread the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Don’t be so focused on how much you can earn, or the acquisition of more possessions – more “things” – more technological gadgets or more electronic toys! And though most of you are not now an active member of the armed forces, you can help make sure that our nation does not misuse our armed forces by sending them too easily into harm’s way, and to increase violence or war in other countries. We certainly should not be arming other countries, where violent terrorists can get their hands on the weapons we sell. Finally, although you may not be part of the local police force, you and I can ensure that “justice for all” is adhered to in this neighborhood, community and state. This is especially important these days, when we are much more aware of the disparities in the criminal justice system, starting with inequities in education and economics, between the white majority and our African American, Asian, Latino and Native American communities. Now that we are becoming aware, ignorance is no longer an excuse, so you and I have to “step up” and do the right thing. Not so much to argue and debate over the merits and strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement, or the innocence or guilt of any one individual (like Jamar Clark), but to rectify the many instances of injustice that undeniably occur in our own city and state.

So what shall we do? Because we, the baptized, have been given the promise of salvation and everlasting life, because we have been called to follow Jesus, we are called to bear fruit in Jesus' name. Bear fruit, be honest, share what you have with others. It is very simple and clear, actually. Not in order to "earn" salvation, but in order to live responsibly as a child of God in this world, as a person of faith. To respond with joy to the salvation which God in Christ has given to us and the world, to live generously out of thanksgiving for what we have received! That is true "stewardship" of the gifts of God.

Today we can see one ancient example of faith in the legendary Saint Lucy (aka Santa Lucia, whose feast day is today. In the days of real persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire under Emperor Diocletian, she brought food to the poor Christians hiding in the catacombs underneath the city, wearing candles on her head so that she could see her way in the dark. (At least that's how the story goes.) After refusing to marry someone who did not believe as she did, her suitor denounced her, and Lucy was tortured and martyred. Although she had lived and died in Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, she was honored for her generosity and her faith (and her courage in martyrdom), and eventually she became a favorite saint in Scandinavian countries. So the root of the customs of Saint Lucy's day in Sweden and Norway come from the ancient legends told about her.

But the interesting thing to me about celebrating Saint Lucy today isn't the crown of candles, singing the Neapolitan "Sancta Lucia" song, or even the saffron buns. Rather, it is remembering what Saint Lucy did when there were Christians hiding out in the catacombs, fearing for their lives. You see, the Christians then were considered "atheists" by the Romans (as they didn't worship the Emperor or sacrifice to all those Roman gods). They were looked upon as outsiders who worshiped a different God, who said they followed an obscure, Jewish prophet named Jesus (whom the Romans had crucified, and they said was risen from the dead)! Some of them were immigrants and refugees from the Jewish revolt in Palestine, and they were looked upon with suspicion. You could call them the "Muslims" of their day, perhaps – or the undocumented immigrants or refugees of the time (even if they were Roman citizens). So, Saint Lucy left her comfortable home and dared to go down into the subterranean depths below the city to meet these strangers who were hated or suspected of disloyalty by everyone else, and bring them bread. She brought the light of God's love into the darkness.

This is the model before us today, an example for you and me to imitate. "What shall we do, Jesus?" we ask, when we live in this time of division and ethnic hatred throughout the world, when people are fearful of the prospects of violence, when we are arguing over "rights" to carry guns in public, and Muslim refugees from the Syrian civil war (and other conflicts) are considered too dangerous to allow into this country. These are families we are talking about –

men, women, and children – who are fleeing for their lives and can't go back. Some would lump them in with dangerous terrorists, and some in this country are attacking our Muslim neighbors, and burning mosques. This is shameful – and I know that John the Baptist would mince no words for the “brood of vipers”, who suggest and carry out such hateful behaviors. Perhaps we might call John the “Anti-Trump

Our scriptures say “Welcome the stranger!” “You shall love the immigrant and the alien, for once you were immigrants and aliens yourselves. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

These are the directions from our Lord as to how we are called to treat our neighbors, strangers as well as friends – with love. What then shall we do? It is very clear – and too few are speaking or doing this today. We must set a different example – following the example of Christ. For as we do this, we bring the light of God's love into the darkness of this world, bringing peace, hope, and life. Amen.

...especially for refugee families from civil war in Syria, who seek safety and a home. Let us pray...

For immigrants in this country, especially for Daniel and Hepzibah, Reva Rasmussen's friends from Africa, who have just received American residency in December, 2015, after 25 years. Let us pray....