The Season of Advent is about waiting and anticipating of what is to come. It reminds us of the promises of hope that the Messiah child would bring, especially in places and times where hope may seem hard to come by in the midst of tragedies, struggles and challenges.

This third week of Advent is always the hardest for us to get through. Not only because we have the longest night of the year this week (at least for those who live in the northern hemisphere), we also deal with the tension between Christmas that is here but not yet. We still have more than a full week ahead until Christmas. Everything looks and feels ready based on the outward appearance, but we must ask ourselves, are we ready deep inside to receive Christ in our hearts?

This is the real challenge for all Christians during this season of Advent. It kind of epitomizes our whole Christian faith of living in a liminal space and in an in-between time. On one hand, Christ is already among us, but on the other hand, he has promised that he will come again. Are we ready for Christ’s coming?

As we read in our Gospel lesson earlier, our text today continues to keep us focused on John the Baptizer. John was a “no non-sense” kind of guy. He told it like it is, even though he knew that the people probably would not like what he had to tell them. John called them out with a series of warnings. Well, many other prophets had done that over the history. These prophets were supposed to the agents between God and the people. Often times the people chose to ignore, as many had done to John this time around. They didn’t want to hear the bad news and areas of sins that they had done. They claimed their own self-righteousness was good enough and did not need God to intervene their lives. John referred to the people as **“*brood of vipers!”*** telling them to ***Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and be thrown into the unquenchable fire****.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Those are some pretty harsh words or warnings coming from John! Certainly not the greetings that anyone would like to hear, especially not during holiday season, when we’re supposed to be in good cheers and jovial spirit.

John called out for change among the people before God’s judgement comes…change in terms of their attitudes, which are translated into acts of confession and repentance. *The axe is [already] lying at the root of the trees[[2]](#footnote-2),* said John. The crowd got anxious and desperate, asking him *“What then should we do?”* Those who came to John realized that they needed to change…but the change does not take place by the simple immersion of water, real change occurs from within. What we need is more than the baptism by water but by the baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit, from the inside out.

The appearance of John came in a time when there was a great deal of confusion among the people, as there are today. People simply didn’t know what and who they should believe. They wanted to hear the truth…and John told them the truth. But unfortunately many still did not believe in him. There were many false prophets who made false claims to be the next Messiah. Who are we to believe and follow? Many people were not quite sure how to deal with John. He just seemed to come out of nowhere. Afterall, there had not been a prophet for more than 400 years. Many chose to ignore him and thought he was just another quack and that he would retreat quietly into the wilderness. But despite his eccentric physical outward appearance, John was the real deal and his prophetic voice was NOT to be silenced or ignored. Some believed in John but some didn’t.

Verse 15 tells us that those who came to John were filled with great excitement and anticipation of what was to come, but deep in their hearts, they probably had some reservation about him. Could he really be the One?

To much of their disappointment, the answer was “No”. John was NOT the Messiah. John was just the table-setter, the messenger, the preparer of the way. He was the opening act to the main event! John came with a series of warning and preparation for us to take on. It wasn’t so much of what we can “DO” physically that would save us, but more so what we must become. We may “DO” everything in preparation of what is to come, but unfortunately, what good is it if our hearts are not ready or fit to receive the Messiah who is to come. **Can we make Christ or Christmas come sooner when our hearts are not ready to receive him?**

John’s call for repentance was a **Call for ACTION**. But it’s really more of a changing of our heart and our attitude, meaning we must be willing to let go of some things that we cherish. We must be willing to toss aside our personal ambition and motivation, check our stubborn hearts and egos at the door and be honest with ourselves and with God.

John put an ultimatum to the people to consider then (and to us today) that *every tree that does not bear good fruits will be cut down and be thrown into the fire.[[3]](#footnote-3)* Repentance is possible, according to John, even out of these hearts of stones, which may be dry, hard and lifeless out in the desert, God is able to raise up children to Abraham.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The crowd promptly asked John “**What Should We Do?**” He replied to them saying, *“whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.”* And for the tax collectors *“collect no more than what you are supposed to”* for your own personal gain. And for the soldiers, *“do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

John called out each of these groups individually concerning what they must DO, as a sign of their commitment and changing of their hearts and attitudes towards repentance and salvation. Each of them must bear their own responsibilities, with the authorities and the power that were given to them. John’s calling out in the wilderness was an outcry for **justice** among all of God’s people…between those who **“Have”** and those who **“Have Not”**; those who are in **power** or in **control** and those who are being **oppressed** and **defenseless**; those who live in the **elite inner circle** vs. those who **live marginally on the outside looking in**.

Jesus’s highly anticipated earthly mission was not just to bring salvation to people, but to break down those barriers that separate us from genuine relationship with one another and with God. **Christ** **came to be the reconciler of this broken world and to make things straight once and for all**. Certainly he didn’t come silently. **He came to disrupt the political establishment and social disorder by turning things upside down and inside out.** The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Those who are exalted and think highly of themselves shall be humbled. Those who are weak or whose voices have been suppressed shall be empowered to speak the truth with conviction and courage.

**Christ came to invoke these dramatic transformations in terms of how we see, how we think and ultimately what we do. Christ came to call upon us not just to be hearers but as “doers of God’s word” once again!**

As we read in the Old Testament responsive reading earlier, the prophet Zephaniah also prophesied God’s mission of a Messiah and a series of warning of judgement that was to come for the people of Israel, who were living under captivity and in exile. However, in the midst of hopeless situations, the prophet offered the people a glimmer of hope and salvation that ***the Lord will take way judgements against the people. He will turn away their enemies. The Lord will rejoice over us with gladness, renew us in his love, and exult over us with loud singing. The Lord will remove disaster and fear from us and will restore peace and justice at the end.[[5]](#footnote-5)*** But there are actions that the people needed to take, that comes in the form of personal repentance and turning of one’s hearts back to God, just as Zephaniah and many other prophets who came before John foretelling the consequences of unrepented sins before the coming Messiah.

Each of us must also do our parts in bearing fruits, worthy of our repentance. Our salvation is not guaranteed by our lineage or our affiliation of our ancestors, but we are saved only by the grace of God and our faithful obedience to the Spirit’s calling. May God be the ultimate judge and not measured by our personal accomplishments or efforts.

During these cold and the longest nights of the season, with the Winter Solstice upon us this week, God reveals to us that God’s light continues to shine and burns brightly within us, exceeding our expectations. But **John challenged us to see the world beyond ourselves from a different perspective, by inviting others to be a part of us. The truth and God’s love shall overcome all the evils of this world.**

As John told those who came to him wanting to be baptized that they must share what we have (in terms of food and clothing) with others; do not cheat others for our personal gains or do not extort money from others. Both of these groups, the tax-collectors and the soldiers, represent a system of self-serving privileges that favors one class of people over the others. They represent a system of social inequalities, and economic disparities that must be retributed, before the promised Messiah comes to restore peace and justice in this world once and for all.

**The process of repentance begins by looking into ourselves, through the lives of others, by examining our actions, our thoughts, our motivations, and our prayers.** What better way to achieve that by sharing our lives and walking alongside with others in humility and compassion towards others. Perhaps this is the new season that we are called to be a part of today? **Let us love one another as Christ has already loved us; Let us forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us.**

**God expects us to Behave, not merely Believe. We shall be Doers of God’s Word and not just Hearers! We shall be the Peacemaker, the Reconciler, and the Healers by demonstrating God’s justice and mercy upon those who hurt us, or disappointed us. We shall be the proclaimer of God’s truth, grace, and love to all of humanities.**

**John message to us was a message of renewal and hope, not a message of destruction and fear. It was a word spoken in love, not in hatred.[[6]](#footnote-6)** This, I think, captures the essence of this season that is upon us, as we examine our own selves, our old habit and routine of life – the way we’ve been doing things for years. It is about interrupting the cycles of our habits and patterns of how we see things. Let us re-imagine what God may be challenging us to do next, as we renew our commitment to serve God and to serve those around us. It’s about relinquishing power, letting go of some of our personal desires and ambitions, and rededicating our lives once again, before Christ comes once again to redeem us and to save us. Thanks be to God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Luke 3:8-9* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Luke 3:9* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Luke 3:9* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Luke 3:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Zephaniah 3:15-18* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Jennings Willie James, Connections, Year C Vol. 1 P.45* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)