

## Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

“What Shall I Do?”

Luke 3:1-20

12/9/18c

We learn from Martin Luther’s Small Catechism that an important question in the Christian life is “What does this mean?”

We learn from John the Baptist and the Gospel of Luke that another important question in the Christian life is “What shall I do?”

This was the question that multiple parties in succession put to John, as long ago, at the banks of the Jordan River, they were hearing and responding to the prophet’s preaching. They all wondered the same thing: “What shall I do?”

<sup>10</sup> ...the people asked him, saying, “*What shall we do then?*”

<sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

<sup>12</sup> Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, *what shall we do?*”

<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”

<sup>14</sup> Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “*And what shall we do?*”

So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”

We do well to follow the example of all of these, and not to follow the example of another. There was at least one prominent man at that time who did *not* respond to John’s message with the query, “What shall I do?” and that man was of course the tetrarch and ruler, Herod. He was extremely irked that John should rebuke him concerning his unlawful divorce and his marriage to his brother’s wife. Though Herod asserted his power over John and succeeded in having him arrested (and, we

know, ultimately executed), Herod will not get away with it in the end, I assure you.

**And that is because John, this fascinating man we are dealing with and whom we meet on this Second Sunday in Advent, John was a man of God who spoke the word of God.**

We have the evangelist St. Luke to thank for making that abundantly clear. Among the four gospels it is Luke's in which we read this explicit statement: that "the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness" (3:2). It sounds like the way the Old Testament prophets described their message and preaching (see Joel 1:1 and Micah 1:1). So everything that John would go on to speak and to preach is thereby shown to be God's Word—a Word to be heeded indeed!

This is the more emphatic from the way Luke frames this account. I love it. Luke, who loves details and historical accuracy, sets John's ministry in historical context by telling us all the rulers who were in charge at the time. He doesn't miss anyone, ticking off all the big names, from the Emperor of Rome on down the line: "Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate...Herod...Philip...Lysanias...Annas and Caiaphas." And believe me, in that day, that was a lineup of important folks. But here's the thing: Who's more important and far above them all? God, of course. And that's just who Luke names last of all: "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (and all these other guys in their roles of rule and leadership), at that time *the word of God came to John!*"

It's like if we were to say, "In the second year of the presidency of Donald Trump, John Hickenlooper being yet governor of Colorado, and Randy Ahrens mayor of Broomfield, while Antonio Guterres was Secretary-General of the United Nations," the Word of God was taken up and preached in pulpits across Colorado—including Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church!

Do you get it? **We're dealing here today (as we are every Sunday) with no small matters, but with matters that have to do with God. Yes, we're dealing with God's Word and God's own message.** We ought to listen, to hearken, to heed. We ought to repent, and to do it not in pretense, but sincerely, asking the question, as the soldiers and the others in our text asked: "What shall I do?"

You know, while we are in no way saved by our good works, yet we should still be busy and active in all kinds of good works because God has commanded them, and because repentance should be true and not just a show—and that is what John the Baptist's message and preaching are about: repentance. Repentance: changing one's mind about sin. Turning from the way and the path of sin to God—because you can't take told of Jesus and His gift of salvation if your hands are busy with sin.

I don't know exactly how God's call to repent applies to each one of you here, but I do know that it applies. In the immortal words of Chad Philipp, my seminary classmate from Texas, "All of y'all need to repent!" And so do I. For as we heard last Wednesday evening in our first Advent midweek service, from Romans 3, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). You can protest that you're "a good person" and by no means part of that group, but you'll just be teaming up with Herod from our text, and believe me, his is not a team you want to join.

So on this Second Sunday in Advent we're summoned to a change, for that is what repentance is and must be. "Stir up our hearts, O Lord," we prayed earlier. **Jesus is coming! A king is near. Which one? The King of kings. The King who brings salvation. "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Luke 3:4).**

For a long while selfishness and greed have marked your life. Repent! Have a care for the need of your neighbor, and show it in concrete

action. Set aside your wants and wishes and open your hand in generosity to those less fortunate than you.

For a long while bitterness has consumed your heart, for there are many who have done you wrong. Yet are you without all fault? Repent! Renounce bitterness. Practice what Jesus has told us: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault... Be ready to share forgiveness. You may win your brother” (cf. Matthew 18).

For a long while you have satisfied yourself. You have gazed lustfully. You have indulged your appetites. You have run with your passions. Repent! Remember that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God. Honor that temple. Cherish your spouse. Give thanks to God in word and deed as you live a holy life, for you have been bought with a price! (Cf. 1 Corinthians 6)

There—that’s the good news today, the hope for all those repenting. You are not on your own. If you were, everything would be lost for sure. But you have been bought with a price. Not the price of your repentance, your tears, your good works. But the price of the good works, tears, sweat, blood, and righteousness of another—another, a heaven-sent friend, a heaven-sent friend of sinners. One who Himself has no sin, but who is pleased to shoulder all of yours. The good news of this John the Baptist Sunday is Jesus—the one whom John the Baptist preached and proclaimed.

“I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

John is not *the* man, John is just His forerunner, His way-preparer. Jesus is where it’s ultimately at.

Jesus, John declares, baptizes and bestows the purifying, sanctifying Holy Spirit—for Jesus is the Son of God, who in the verses just after our

text would Himself be baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit, so that He could journey in His great love for you to the cross, to die for you, to the grave, to be buried for you, and to His resurrection, to live for you forevermore.

Jesus is why we repent. Jesus is why we believe. Jesus is why we ask, “What shall I do?” Jesus.

Because Jesus is great and has done something great. Jesus has suffered and died and risen and ascended to share God’s loving gift of salvation with you. Through Baptism that salvation has been applied to you. This Advent that salvation is announced and again made real and present for you, to receive and to enjoy. God’s love, God’s salvation did not remain on a shelf, and it was not kept a secret. It was enfleshed. “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God”—*Luke 3:6*. What do you hear and see today? The salvation of God.

That salvation leads us to rejoice. And that salvation leads us daily to ask, “Lord Jesus, King of my salvation, what shall I do? What shall I do in Your name, Jesus—You who have saved me for all eternity? What shall I do for my neighbor, who needs my love, and whom You call me to love and serve? The Christian Gospel lifts us up to heaven, but it was never meant to leave us in the clouds. The Good News and the Holy Spirit’s grace empower us for a life lived on the ground, in obedience to God’s commandments—not to earn our salvation thereby, but in the confidence that our salvation has already been earned by Jesus.

St. Paul assured the Philippians their salvation was secure in Christ: “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

And then Paul also prayed for them “that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the

fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (vv.9-11).

Paul, we see, prayed that the Philippians would love one another and be busy in all good works. But he rightly confessed that all these “fruits of righteousness” were “by Jesus Christ”—that is, they were not by the own power of the Christians, but by God’s grace, because Jesus was living in the baptized.

That is true of you too.

Jesus is living in you. His way led from heaven to earth and to a cross for you, so that you, baptized into His death and His resurrection life, might walk a new way—His way—day by day. The way of righteousness. The way of holiness. The way of love. The way of peace. The way of joy.

And you know where that way ends: “He will gather the wheat into His barn”.

In Advent and in every season, we remember the goal and the glorious culmination of God’s gracious salvation. It is eternal life with God in heaven. Eternal life. God’s gift. Not for those who have never sinned. Not for those who do enough good works. But for all who repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God ~ And: Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make His paths straight.  
<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled  
And every mountain and hill brought low;  
The crooked places shall be made straight  
And the rough ways smooth;  
<sup>6</sup> And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup> And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup> So the people asked him, saying, “What shall we do then?”

<sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

<sup>12</sup> Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”

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<sup>14</sup> Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “And what shall we do?”

So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, <sup>16</sup> John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>17</sup> His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup> And with many other exhortations he preached to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.