

Fruits Worthy of Repentance 2021  
Isaiah 12:1-6 Luke 3:7-18

Isaiah 12:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

You will say on that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 3:7-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

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? 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. 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." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 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." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

When someone comes and talks to me about wanting to be baptized,  
or when parents ask for their child or children to be baptized,

I have never shouted back at them, vs. 7-8

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

I do, however, usually point out that they are making sacred vows  
right in front of God & everybody ...so make those promises authentic  
by making a real effort to live up to the words you are saying.

The people coming out to John in the wilderness for baptism  
were doing so as a sign of their repentance, their desire for renewal  
in trust and hope because God is gracious, powerful and merciful,  
just as promised and assured in the Isaiah 12 passage.

When that passage we heard read from Isaiah was written,  
the people were still suffering and struggling in exile,  
which they understood to be a just consequence for having  
rejected and turned aside from the ways & good of the Lord.  
But in these verses the prophet has shifted to Good News and hope,  
as with great joy he proclaims that God has not abandoned them,  
but will forgive and heal, cleanse and restore the nation.

This is the promise and the Good News, the true hope and joy,  
that despite their terrible sin, losses, defeats and troubles  
God is still there to accomplish great and wonderful things.

Therefore, Isaiah writes about hope & promises **yet to be fulfilled**  
that are incredibly generous, merciful and remarkable, vs. 1-2, 5a-6

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with  
me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and  
my might; he has become my salvation.

Sing praises to the Lord, ... Shout aloud and sing for joy..., for great in your midst is the Holy One  
of Israel.

### **So how could the prophet promise something so hopeful and reassuring?**

In verse 2, Isaiah quotes from Exodus 15:2,  
words that Moses sang right after God saved the escaping Israelites  
by drowning Pharaoh's pursuing army and chariots in the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and  
I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Those familiar words of praise & thanksgiving were in celebration  
of God's faithfulness in liberating them from Egyptian slavery.

Isaiah's point is that even as they struggled and endured exile,  
**just as God provided for the people in the time of Moses,**  
**in time God would provide rescue and care for them,**  
**which was their true hope, strength and salvation,**  
**sustaining them through any troubles they faced...**

... therefore, the prophet boldly proclaims, vs. 3

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

Here, joy is about grace and hope beyond our current circumstance  
since we're trusting in who God is because we know what God has done,  
**and because trust defeats fear with peace & joy even amid struggle.**

In our cultural context, joy usually means to enjoy or take pleasure,  
pleasure that comes from the outside, due to our circumstance.

In contrast, Christian joy comes from a grateful and humble heart  
with its trust and focus on Christ, which is **an internal reality**  
that believes God's word and promises while walking in faith,

which rests entirely upon who God is, the very nature of God.

**God is love. That is who the Lord is, and he chooses to derive great delight and joy from loving the people he has created.**

By choice God sees that there is more good in us to love than we could ever suppose, imagine, expect or believe.

The people came out to John trying to make sense of their lives, struggling and suffering under Roman occupation and corruption, and John challenges them to become who God created them to be. The fire John describes was about burning off whatever distracts us, such as ego, envy, arrogance, etc. so we can grow into our best self.

John is not selling fire-insurance,  
but it's about authentic and pragmatic change.

**If you've repented for real, then your words and deeds will reveal.**

John is pointing out that faith is not entirely internal because authentic faith will guide what we do and say, so...

**- what do my words & deeds declare about the authenticity of my faith?**

In response to John's warning and call for authenticity, vs. 10

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"  
... or now that we've repented, what should we do?

Notice that John doesn't answer, respond by sitting in church.  
He didn't say respond by watching religious programs on TV,  
not even by reading the Bible or thinking nice thoughts.

John's answer is totally pragmatic within their context, vs. 11-14

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 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."

If you have extra, then share it.  
If you're a tax collector, then be honest.  
If you're a soldier, be content and don't exploit.

That is all practical advice that fits any context or circumstance -  
**- share what you have plenty of, don't take what isn't yours,  
and be content with what you've been given ...  
...within your vocation do right, and you will stand out & be different.**

John's ideas probably won't entirely fix our whole world,  
but could make our little corner of the world a bit better,  
and actually that's really no small thing!

John is offering new life to tax collectors, soldiers & all sinners,  
a proclamation of hope for us despite all that tell us otherwise...  
... meaning we're not stuck with our worst self, but we can change.

We can be different, we can do better, **and that is Good News**,  
which starts by being sorry enough to do something different.

One of the thickest books with the tiniest print in my office,  
is Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory*, from around the 1650's.

In his book, Baxter describes, vocation by vocation  
specifically how our Christian faith guides what we should do  
as a soldier, a teacher, a politician, a lawyer, doctor, etc. ...  
... how to be an authentic Christian within your vocation and context...  
... how to live as a faithful Christian in whatever your situation.

For example because of your vocation as a Christian, as a soldier,  
always be ready, knowing that you might be killed in battle,  
and don't rob or oppress the poor, the innocent or powerless.

As a Christian and as a teacher, more than just your subject,  
teach your students to live good lives in service to their Maker.

As a Christian and as a physician, being close to illness and death,  
don't neglect that your patients are far more than just bodies.

The point is, in the ordinary of life where God has placed you,  
how does your faith inform how you love and how you do your job,  
and how you relate to others God has placed in your life? ...  
... **i.e. how is God's grace making a difference in my life?**

**It's not so much about grand actions or great heroic deeds.**  
**No, it's simply living into the Kingdom, right where we are,**  
**in the ordinary of life where we can make a real difference...**  
**... if we will look for opportunities to be honest, kind and merciful**  
**with caring acts of grace which even we ordinary folks can do.**

I have a friend who wonderfully exemplifies this within her context,  
doing one of the most difficult and demanding jobs I can imagine.

She is an elementary school teacher who specializes  
in teaching troubled children, the truly incorrigible ones  
who have been expelled from other classrooms and schools.  
She deals with unbelievable violence, neglect and issues of abuse.

And she says that she manages such a classroom of little monsters  
year after year, student by student,  
because she loves them, and her heart breaks for them.

Tara explained to me one time,  
that whatever violence and abuse these kids inflict upon others,  
it is still far less than the pain, terror, scars and rage  
that these little children are feeling from the inside.

The vicious anger that these difficult children live and express  
comes from the terrible and overwhelming loss, ache and suffering,  
the pain, rejection and graceless-cruelty that they have  
already had to endure during their own short lifetimes.

**Now she doesn't condone or accept their acts of classroom violence,  
but she does see beyond their immediate external behavior  
by focusing on their great need for hope and healing.**

God has called and equipped this remarkable woman of compassion  
to give those kids a break by showing them unconditional love...  
... and that I believe is the true message of hope and joy,  
the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the meaning of Christmas.

Christmas celebrates that same life-changing power, the truth  
that in Jesus Christ, God came and became human flesh,  
or as Eugene Peterson describes it,  
"in Jesus, God came to live in our neighborhood."

**And, the heart of the Christmas story, is just that:  
God's infinite, beyond all reason, abiding and steadfast love...  
... and Christmas joyously celebrates  
that steadfast, infinite, inclusive and extreme love of God--  
--the Light that shines into our darkness & dreary places,  
and that brings healing, hope, peace, love and joy.**

**And when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News is true,  
and when we begin to experience that truth for ourselves  
how much God really does love us, even just as we are,  
that becomes the most significant fact of truth in our lives  
which can reorient everything about how we choose to live.**

It is not God's intention or desire for our lives  
to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret,  
**nor for us, through good works and religious observance  
to try and earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes.**

Rather, a truly blessed and meaningful Christmas is when  
we discover the promise and power of God's loving purpose -  
- that God's life-transforming love and peace, joy and hope  
are there for us in the good times, **and even amid our struggles.**

That means,  
whatever our circumstance or situation in life or the world,  
God still delights that we are his, always welcoming us home...

... and the truth is, God still loves us and is with us and for us...  
... which describes exactly what God did for us at Bethlehem,  
God in the flesh, born into our world to be here among us-  
**- and that is the point and the true message of Advent and Christmas.**

The purpose of this season of Advent is to examine how we're living,  
our values, our priorities, our goals, and our spirituality  
to prepare us for Christmas, ready for the coming of Jesus.

Advent moves us toward receiving God's promised blessings and joy ...  
... because if our idea of a good Christmas  
is nothing deeper or more than warm fuzzy feelings

or a passing dream of peace on earth and good will,  
or decorations, carols and family gatherings,

**then our concept of Christmas is far too small and insignificant,  
and we need to learn the difference between tinsel and truth.**

So how do God's promises and faithfulness strengthen us?

The evidence of God's promises faithfully fulfilled in the past  
becomes our assurance and guarantee for the future,  
that indeed **I am exactly where God put me to serve his purpose,**

that according to the wisdom and will of the Lord God,  
my uniqueness and gifts are **exactly what's needed  
to accomplish my best, God's own purpose and desire.**

**So, does John's call to repent make us feel uneasy or uncomfortable?  
Is it really his aggressive call to repent that disturbs us,  
or maybe, it's actually the inadequacy of our response.**