



## LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**December 17, 2000**  
**3rd Sunday in Advent**

See also: [\[2006\]](#)

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

**Isaiah 12:2-6**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Luke 3:7-18**

John the Baptist's words are very harsh in this passage from Luke, calling his listeners a "brood of vipers," and warning them of the wrath to come. He challenges them to "bear fruit that befits repentance" without using their heritage as an excuse to avoid his message. His warning is that unless the tree bears good fruit, it is cut down and thrown into the fire. An odd character, John is calling his listeners to prepare the way of the Lord. The passage ends with the writer saying, "So, with many other exhortations, John preached good news." Given the harsh, prophetic, even apocalyptic, mood of the text, how can this be good news?

His message scares his listeners so much they ask, "What then shall we do?" The multitudes ask the question, as do the tax collectors and the soldiers. John's response to them is to lead a moderate life, taking into consideration the needs of the other person. His response is essentially the second great commandment of Jesus.

The central image of the passage is the tree, which is a symbol of the organic, that which is tied into the cycles of nature and the powers of life and death. It is an image from the natural world of transformation.

The harshness of the message is required because transformation is not easy, it is not pleasant, it is not optional. The good news is that is the way that leads to new life. Repentance is John's message to stop, turn around and proceed in the opposite direction. Instead of running away, or avoiding, or excusing, turn and face the awesome, terrifying, life-giving power of God.

Zephaniah contains a call to repentance with warnings of the day of wrath and judgment. The book ends with the assigned passage, a joyful expression of God's grace and mercy and restoration. This is the good news John speaks of.

Paul's expression of peace in God is one of the most comforting texts. The call to rejoice and let go of anxiety, placing every concern in prayer to God is the avenue to true peace.

### **Preaching the texts:**

It might be easy to speak of the necessity of change and the requirements of transformation, but the path that leads to new life is often not an easy path. After all, Jesus described such a path as narrow and difficult. The good news is that beyond change and transformation, there is new life, albeit through death.

A sermon might focus on the odd contrast between the conventionally sweet tone of the Christmas season, with its quiet and happy emphasis upon the nativity scene and the birth of a child, on the one hand, and on the other, this offensive, provocative, rough character of John. Not quite a prophet, nor a sage, nor a Messiah. Where is the good news, in the sweet story or in the harsh character with his difficult message? The way the nativity scene is remembered has rendered it as a tableau, something that is static and unchanging. There is a yearning in the human heart for things to remain the same, or the desire to return to a "Golden Age" of the past. Yet John demands change; he calls us to repent. And if repentance isn't change, I'm not sure what is.

A sermon might focus on the question of the listeners in the story: What must we do? John says to bear good fruit. What is bearing good fruit if not changing and growing and simply being a part of the transformation that death brings? What does a tree "do"? It is simply being a tree, being subject to the powers of life and death.

What might be behind the question of what to do is simply extending human perversity to continue to find different ways of controlling the future on our own terms. But the desire and attempt to control the future is, in reality, trying desperately to protect one's self from the power of God. A sermon might describe the wrong way of "doing," which is motivated by fear of God's power, and then describing what John's message calls us to do.

"Doing," in John's terms, means giving one's self over to the power of God, submitting to it, trusting it, even though we have to release our own efforts to control our future. In human terms, trusting God is the riskiest venture of all. Yet, ironically, it is the only way to new life and to a peace that passes all human understanding. John, in contrast to the image of an unchanging baby in a manger, is the choice between clinging to a dead but golden past, and a call to an unknown future. John is not pretty, he is not reassuring, he is not anything that is attractive in our desire to hang onto the known past. The choice between a baby in a manger and the rough message of transformation is a scary choice. We can continue to hang onto the lure of the past, but that requires us to continually recreate and rehearse the same story over and over again, with a deep anxiety that it might

change. Just try to change the words to Christmas carols at Christmas Eve Candlelight service. Anxiety is the tell-tail sign that we have made the wrong choice. Peace is the result of making the right choice. A sermon would make this choice clear and persuasively difficult, but inevitable in order to experience new life.

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