

Sermon: Our honest walk with God

Waiting ... for Christmas break; students get time away from class and some have jobs that allow time off from December 25th to New Year's Day.

Waiting ... for Christmas morning, gathering round the lighted tree as presents are excitedly opened and a special meal is shared with the family.

Waiting ... for the stroke of midnight when we get to shout, "Happy New Year."

So much of this season is built around waiting.

This is unlike any other time of the year. We stretch out our celebration of Christmas. Some grumble that decorations go up too early, or complain that the holiday has become too commercialized.

In truth though, a lot of people feel a unique kind of specialness. We hope that during the holiday season, people will act a little bit nicer. People in financial distress call churches and charities hoping the generosity will be greater because it's Christmas.

But, to me it feels a bit strange to say we are awaiting the arrival of Jesus because he has already come - 2000 years ago. Thus, our Advent scripture readings are infused with double meaning. Our ancestors in faith awaited the Messiah; we await the Second Coming of the Messiah.

As we do, we listen to the sermon of John the Baptist preached on the bank of the Jordan River in 30 AD. What does the arrival of Jesus - his first coming - mean for us now - in the living of our lives today? Why is it important that Jesus was born?

"The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of the forgiveness of sins."

John preached to everyone who came - the wealthy, the poor, the sophisticated urbanites and rough-around-the-edges shepherds and fishermen. To all he said, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

The bearing of fruit metaphor was used both by John the Baptist and by Jesus as a way of describing what is produced in the life of a believer. In Matthew 7 versus 15 to 18, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets. You will know them by their fruits. Every good tree bears good fruit, and every bad tree bears bad fruit". Jesus later says, "God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit".

Fruit is a sign of growth. When we lead others, those outside the faith, to meet Jesus, we are bearing fruit. When we help new believers grow in their understanding of God, we bear fruit. When we guide believers into new opportunities for mission and good works, we bear fruit.

When we meet people in great need and help them out of our own abundance, we bear fruit. When, through study and prayer, we deepen our relationship with God, we bear fruit. When we encourage people who are hurting, and when we walk with them through their trials, we bear fruit and grow as disciples.

Jesus' very drastic statement is that when we do not bear fruit, our connection with him is severed. There's no such thing as casual faith. We grow as disciples, or our faith is dead.

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance," John preached. Repentance, of course, is making that full turn away from the temptations and cultural trappings of the world around us and turning fully to God. Repentance is the most radical change one can experience. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit," John preaches, "is cut down and thrown into the fire".

Anyone who takes the word of God seriously would, at this point in the story, come to two conclusions. First, being thrown into the fire is judgment. It is the state of being cut-off from God. Failure to bear fruit, failure to live an active faith, is equal to calling judgment down on us, and we do not want that.

We do not want to face life without God, much less face eternity after death without God. The second conclusion is, we must ask ourselves, how do we

avoid this judgment? That's what the crowds hearing John wanted to know.

Luke describes who John is and what John is doing, Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." John is the one preparing the way and Jesus is the Lord. Because Jesus has come, everything has changed. That's why John issues the call for repentance, and that call involves changing is what our lives are about.

What must we do? The crowds asked that question and John offered a ready, practical response. "Whoever has two coats, share with any who has none. Whoever has food, share with anyone who is hungry".

Judgment does not have to come for us. It's coming, and will be harsher than we can imagine and will be final. God's judgment is to be feared because God is holy and will not tolerate sin and every one who sins. But John offers a lifeline. Share with each other so that no one is freezing or starving or crippled by poverty.

"What should we do?" Tax collectors asked. They collected taxes imposed by the Roman empire. Roman soldiers would force peasants to pay whatever the tax collectors demanded. Most tax collectors demanded higher amounts than Rome required, and got rich pocketing the difference. They were thieves.

What should we do? John doesn't tell them to quit the tax collecting business. He says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed." In other words, work ethically.

What does that look like in your job? Where you work, away from the church, in the world - that's where your discipleship is on display. It doesn't mean you're always talking about Jesus. Sometimes we do. At other times, you do your secular work to the very best of your ability and you do it honestly. When we live in integrity, we bear fruit. When we treat people around us with kindness, we bear fruit worthy of repentance.

"What should we do?" the soldiers asked John. The soldiers were charged with maintaining order. They possessed unchecked power. They could

bully the people and take what they wanted, and they did. What should we do, asked these soldiers who felt convicted by John's words.

"Do not extort money by threats," he answered. "Be satisfied by your wages." He didn't tell them to quit the military. John did not impose nonaggression as a rule for God-worshippers. In fact, his answer implies they would go right on being soldiers, work that is by nature violent.

But, if we take the bullying, the threats, and the intimidation of common folk out of their work, then soldiers are responsible protectors who can be respected and even admired. When we use whatever power we possess for good, to help people, to contribute to people's flourishing, we bear fruit.

Sharing, acting ethically and honestly, and protecting and helping are all ways we can, in our lives, bear fruit worthy of repentance. We choose to live this way because Jesus has come.

His coming, his Advent, is a sign that God's judgment is coming. We take that seriously and know that on Judgment Day, if we must stand on our own merit, we'll be found lacking. So, we repent. We live to worship God and help others. We acknowledge God as Lord throughout our lives, not allowing any aspect of life to be secular, apart from God's rule. And then, we trust God.

John knew that Jesus, and not he, was the Savior and Lord. "I am not worthy to untie his sandals" he says. He baptizes with the Holy Spirit. He will judge, collecting the good fruit and bringing it into God's house, and casting the bad out to be burned, cut off from God. We can't control that harvest. We can't determine if we will be saved or judged. God judges and we are at God's mercy.

So, John, offers something we can all do in our lives, right now as we wait. Because Jesus has come, we can share, be honest, be ethical, be kind, and be compassionate. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can live as people of the Kingdom of God even while we live in the world, fallen as it is. And John promises the help of the Holy Spirit because Jesus baptizes us in the Spirit and Jesus has come.

As we wait for his second coming, we live in the reality of his first coming. Our lives are different than the lives of non-believers because the Spirit is in us. The world needs us to be different just as the world needed things to be different when Jesus was born.

So, find someone with whom you can share. Find a hurting person in need of encouragement, or a lonely friend in need of compassion. When your peers cut corners on the job, express your repentance by working ethically. And when the opportunity is there, tell someone about why Jesus is your Lord. Invite someone to come to worship with you. This is the Advent fruit we must share. And people are hungry for it. Amen