

*Advent 3-December 12, 2021*

*Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 3:7-18*

*"Faith, Then Works" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad*

*Dear friends, Grace, and peace to you from God, our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen*

*Scripture informs us that we all have been given various abilities and talents by God. It is good that there is a place in the church for many of these various gifts. Some people are gifted with leadership skills and the willingness to serve on church councils. Others have the ability to teach and work with children and find their place teaching Sunday School. There are many places in the church for people who understand finances and the management of finances are a necessity for church operation. Some people have a creative eye for giving the church a welcoming appeal by decorating with seasonal colors and with beautiful floral arrangements. Some people have the gift of playing or singing music. Again, an essential part of worship and a good use of this talent. Some people have radio announcer quality voices that make the lessons come alive when they read. Children simply bring life to a congregation by their presence. It seems that there is a place in the church for everyone to share their talents.*

*But when it comes to John the Baptist, I really must wonder and say out loud, "God, what were you thinking by choosing John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, the savior of the world." In last week's gospel reading we were again reminded of John's unusual fashion choices and peculiar eating habits. Maybe, these two quirky qualities instead of turning people away, may in fact have drawn some people to get a look at this unusual prophet who was preaching out in the wilderness. I know some pastors who may have some out of the usual habits of most preachers by working in bib overalls and they might even take a few bites of lutefisk on Christmas Eve. I confess that I even tasted a few bites of guinea pig while visiting the country of Chile which is probably worse than eating a grasshopper. Again, I can't really see getting poor dress reviews and having bad breath from unusual foods as gifts of the spirit that can prepare the way for Jesus.*

*But if you get past those two oddities about John the Baptist, you really will start to wonder even more what God was thinking when John starts to speak. Maybe John the Baptist could be a monitor in a jail or for In School Suspension students at least take care of the unruly children in the church nursery who won't behave during worship. But you certainly wouldn't want John the Baptist to be the greeter for your church as people are coming in to be seated. But this is exactly where the Lord chose to use the rough around the edge's preacher John the Baptist.*

*More often you hear greeters or ushers of the church welcome people to worship by saying something like, "Welcome to worship today." or "How are you today?" or "What have you been doing this week?" or "We are glad you have joined us in worship today." Not John the Baptist! John the Baptist's words of welcome to those who came to be baptized were, "You brood of vipers!" or in everyday language "You children of snakes." Would you want to hear more accusations from such a preacher or be baptized by him after he just called you a "little snake?" Or would you look for a different church and hopefully a pastor with a kinder tongue?*

*John doesn't even sort the good people from the bad people by asking what they have been doing to see who deserved to be baptized. John the Baptist shouts at the whole crowd of people and lumps them all in the same category of snakes. Not only does John not ask these people about their goodness, but he also doesn't give them a chance to speak about their goodness.*

*John knew that some of these people would have loved to tell him about the wonderful families that they came from. They thought John would have been interested in hearing the results of their ancestry.com*

test even if they were directly related to Abraham, the father of faith, himself. But instead of John asking them about their purpose in life or listening to what branch of the fruitful family tree they came from; John tells them that God could just as easily raise up faithful children from stones and his ax is about to cut down their family tree and throw it into the fire. "Welcome to worship!"

The crowds of people who were coming out to John the Baptist to be baptized were confused about the order of good works and faith. John in his coarse approach to prepare people for baptism and for the coming of Jesus, was to let them know that all of them were snakes or sinners. John knew that they were coming to him with the thought that baptism was a way to finish what they had already accomplished in their salvation by the good works they had done or who they were related to.

We have learned to be a bit more tactful as you enter our worship services. Instead of calling you a brood of vipers, we do say the same thing only with a little less offensiveness by saying, "We begin our worship with the brief order of Confession and Forgiveness." This Confession is for everyone that comes to this place. Like John the Baptist, I don't need to hear all the good things you have done this week. You have come here to confess that you are a sinner and then hear that you are forgiven.

This can be offensive for some people. But I didn't notice anyway leave worship yet, nor are we told that some of the crowd who came to be baptized by John turned away after being called "vipers". This crowd of people accepted the accusing words of John before being baptized.

It was only after the crowd was baptized and now hearing that they were no longer children of snakes, but now children of God, did John the Baptist listen to the questions from this crowd. After baptism, there was a logical response from the crowd of people and there is a logical response for each of us following receiving faith through the waters of baptism, "What then should we do?"

What we "do" doesn't initiate faith in us. Faith is always first given to us by the Holy Spirit and then only after we are connected to Jesus the good tree, do we bear good fruit. In the same way that John the Baptist didn't exclude any of the crowd from being snakes, he believes that the whole crowd can find a way to provide good works for their neighbor. I suspect that most of our closets, freezers, or bank accounts have more in them than the crowd of people that John was talking to, so like them, we can find something that we have more of than what we need and share it with others. John points out that yes, even tax collectors can do good works by not collecting more than what was calculated to be paid. Soldiers, at the time of John the Baptist, were held in lower esteem than our military people today, in that they often used their power for their benefit. John said that these soldiers now being repented of what they had done in the past could now go out and do good works.

As strange as John the Baptist was, the crowd started to question that maybe he was Jesus. Jesus was very close to coming into view as John the Baptist addressed this crowd of people and John told them that the good news that Jesus was bringing was greater than anything he was saying and the baptism that he would baptize with would be greater than the baptism of water that he was doing.

John the Baptist ended his worship on a good note. We are told that John proclaimed the good news to the people. John proclaimed that the Messiah that they had long waited for to forgive their sins was about to make his appearance and would start creating faith in crowds of people simply with his spoken word and they too would then go out and do good works for their neighbors.

We don't begin our worship by saying, "Come in peace because you have served your neighbors." Instead, after hearing the good news of Jesus Christ you too are sent out by hearing, "Go in peace and serve your neighbors." Faith first, then sent out to do good works. Amen