

Twenty-third Day of Advent
December 23, 2024

Read [Luke 3:7-18](#)

John uses exhortations to proclaim good news. We may have a hard time equating the good news with exhortations, especially when they begin: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” John probes the intent of the crowds coming to be baptized. Repentance is not on a to-do list of religious credentialing. And claiming to be Abraham’s descendants or members of a grace-based church does not skirt the exhortation to repent.

To repent is to bear good fruit; not to bear good fruit is to refuse to repent. Christians have often attempted to exempt themselves from John’s blunt call by labeling him as the last of the Old Testament prophets who preach law in contrast to the gracious words of Jesus. Luke 3 does not permit that easy out. The one coming after him—Jesus—will bring a winnowing fork (17), matching the ax at the base of the unfruitful tree (9). Repentance occurs when Christ arrives.

Repent! What would that look like? Three groups ask John, “What should we do?” Their questions don’t focus on status, i.e., who is in and who is out. The “doing” is ongoing; it is not once and done. A good tree bears good fruit year in and year out. Repentance is like that. The crowds are told to spread their assets. If you have two coats, then you have one to give to anyone who lacks a coat. Anyone (!) — that means no prequalifying. If you have food, do likewise. The tax collectors are to add no fees to line their pockets. The soldiers should not exploit their power over anyone (there is that limitless word again). Being satisfied with their wages sounds like no maximizing the profit potential of their positions. All three answers move away from accumulation toward limitless service. That may seem unimaginable, but we should expect no less from the One born in a manger.

Lead us to repent and reshape us to serve without limits. Bring forth in us the good fruit of a repentant life. Amen.

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