

14 December 2003
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Good Enough is not Good Enough”

Text: John 3:7-18 (Philippians 4:4-9; Zephaniah 3:14-18)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a certain *similarity* between what we heard in the Holy Gospel this evening, and what we hear out in the world so much these days . . . especially these last few days before Christmas. And it goes something like this:

John the Baptist said: ***“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

Our world has a slightly different version of that same thought: *“You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I’m telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town.”* And if you’re not good, you may get a lump of coal for the fire.

When the people heard this message from John, they asked: ***“What then shall we do?”***

Today also the response of many children is to ask: *“What do we have to do to make sure we stay off the “bad” list?”*

John’s answer: ***“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”*** And he goes on to list what those fruits look like for various people.

The answer today: *“Be good.”* How good? *“Good enough.”*

Now, none of this is good news. Parents think they have stress for the holidays! Just imagine the stress put upon kids, their gifts being held hostage in the parents’ hopes of getting a few weeks of good behaviour at the end of the year. And kids know it. They know the game.

There’s a TV commercial on these days which shows a child writing a letter to Santa and telling him that he’s been very, very, very good this year. And with that letter, he leaves Santa a treat. And then he thinks back to something he did this year, and he crosses out a

“very” and adds a treat. Then he thinks of something else, and crosses off another “very” and adds another treat. And the more he thinks, the more he crosses off, until at the end, he has to throw away the first letter, and writes another that says “well, I’ve *tried* really hard to be good this year,” and then he dumps the whole box of treats out for Santa! And hopes that will be good enough.

Be good. How good? Good enough.

But that doesn’t cut it with John the Baptist, nor with God. Good enough is not good enough. ***“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** That doesn’t mean more good fruit than bad fruit – it means one or the other. Either you are a good tree that bears good fruit, or a bad tree that bears bad fruit. Its an either-or. When the Day of Judgment comes, I think we tend to think it will be difficult to determine for some people. That there will be a big group of people “in the middle” where the good and the bad is so close, and so who’s been “good enough?” . . . But no, its not going to be that way. Its going to be very obvious. Because you’re either good or bad, perfect or imperfect, a tree bearing good fruit, or a useless tree that will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

And so hearing such news, it is our natural inclination to ask, as the people asked of John the Baptist: ***“What then shall we do?”*** And so John tells them, but his answers are nothing new – he is just applying the Ten Commandments to each of the groups of people, according to their vocations. These are all ***“Love your neighbor as yourself”*** answers. He gives them Law answers to Law questions, but he doesn’t do so thinking that this is actually going to save these people if they can do these things! No, the purpose of John’s answers is really to accuse and convict the people. For what he tells them are exactly the things they have done that they shouldn’t have done, or the things they haven’t done that they should have! They hear this Law from John, these instruction, but they do not leave simply better instructed! They instead hear that they have failed; that they have fallen short; that they are not good; they are not even good enough.

And so too with us. We hear “Be good!” But we don’t therefore do good things! No, we know we haven’t been good. Like the child in that TV commercial I described earlier – our conscience, our memory, will convict us, until we’ve crossed off whatever good we might have had on our list, and there’s nothing left.

And then what?

That’s what happened to the people who heard John, for as we heard, after being

convicted by the Law, they didn't leave thinking, "*Okay, now we're on the right track!*" No, they stayed, waiting in expectation, "***and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ.***" Because they needed the Christ! They needed forgiveness! They needed what they could not do. They were not good enough. They were missing something. . . . And so could John be the One who had come to bring them what they were missing? What they needed so badly? Was he the Christ, the Messiah?

And so now, now that the people were cut to the heart, John could do what he had come to do – not preach the Law, but point to Jesus! And so he tells the people that he, John, is not the one they need or are waiting for. He is not the Messiah. But the Messiah is coming! And He is greater and *mightier* than John. What John is unable to do, the Messiah is mighty to do, and will do. For "***He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.***"

And so with those words, the people had something to wait for, and look forward to – something outside of themselves. John here did not tell them to "Be good!" or "Do better!" or "Try harder!" He told them of something that was going to happen to them; something that would come from outside of them to give them the help they so desperately needed. And they again had hope. Moments before, their hopes were dashed. Now, they had hope again. And so in just a short time, when Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, and John pointed to Him and declared "***Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!***" (John 1:29) the message was clear. Here was their help. Here was their forgiveness. Here was the Promised One, come to them, to do for them what they could not do for themselves.

And that is the message of Advent for you and I gathered here today. We are waiting in expectation. For we hear words like we heard in the Epistle, from St. Paul, to "***not be anxious about anything,***" but we know we are anxious, about many things. We hear "***whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.***" And we know we haven't done that. We thought what we should not have thought. We have spoken what we should not have spoken. We have remained silent when we should have spoken. We have hurt, we have rejoiced in the misfortunes of others, we have assumed the worst of others. We hear the Law and we do not leave better instructed, or thinking "*Okay, now we're on the right track!*" No, we are accused and convicted. We are not good; we are not good enough.

But Advent means that our hope is coming. Advent points us outside of ourselves, outside of our sin, outside of our "not good enough," and points us to the Promised One,

come to us, to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And so Advent is not about “Be good!” or “Do better!” or “Try harder!” It is about **“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** Who takes away our sin. And so Advent leads us to the birth of the Christ child in the manger, the baby Jesus. The Jesus who grows up and is Himself baptized with the Holy Spirit, and then is baptized with fire as He hangs on the cross. And He who was thus baptized now baptizes us in the same way, and we are watered with the Holy Spirit, and refined and purified with fire, in order that so watered and cared for, we are become good trees producing good fruit. On our own, we cannot do that. But watered and fed by our Messiah, our Saviour, once crucified but now risen from the dead, we become what we were not. Not by our efforts, but by His decree. For the Mighty One does great things **for us!**

And that is what the prophet Zephaniah was speaking about when He prophesied the words of the Old Testament Reading that we heard earlier. Listen to those words again, now in this Advent context:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

[Why? Why such joy and happiness?]

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;

[You are no longer “not good enough!”]

he has cleared away your enemies.

[You are forgiven!]

The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;

[Born in Bethlehem; still present in Word and Sacrament.]

you shall never again fear evil.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.

[Do not despair; do not be anxious.]

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;

he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing.

[He has come to serve you!]

That is indeed what Advent and Christmas is all about. Our Lord, our Saviour, come to us, in human flesh, mighty to serve, mighty to save. And He has saved us, and is here to give us that forgiveness and salvation. And so as John pointed to Jesus, the Son of God, among them in the flesh, so we today point to Jesus, the Son of God, among us in His Word and Sacrament. A presence among us no less real, and no less mighty. **Here** is your help. **Here** is your forgiveness. **Here** is the Promised One, come to you, to do for

you what you cannot do for yourself. Receive Him. Receive His gifts. Receive His life.
And rejoice, for your hope has come.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds
through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.