

**Sermon by Rev W Huizinga
On Luke 3:7-9**

LITURGY

Votum and Salutation

Psalm 25:2

The Ten Words of the Covenant

Psalm 25:3,4

Prayer for the Opening of God's Word

Thankoffering

Psalm 15:1,2,3

Read - Jeremiah 7:1-15

Text - Luke 3:7-9

Sermon

BEAR FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE

Psalm 2:2,3

Pastoral Prayer

Psalm 25:7

Benediction

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the gospel of Luke we first read of the wonderful births of John and of Jesus. Then we read of the ministry of John, the forerunner of our Lord. So having celebrated the birth of our Lord, Christmas, we today pay attention to the ministry of the forerunner.

The public appearance of John the Baptist is a packaged unit. His outward apparel of camel's hair and his diet of locusts and honey, as well as the location of his appearance in the desert all suit his message - "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John applied that message to his hearers. That application is relevant for us as well.

Our church life has become fairly well established in good biblical patterns. However, as the Form for Baptism of Infants warns us, we must not use these good forms and patterns *out of custom or superstition*, but out of heartfelt desire. May John the Baptist warn us against practising a dead christianity. For you can have all the correct forms and the sound doctrine without having any life in it. It can be a polished skeleton. May John the Baptist encourage us with his insistence on a living and heartfelt obedience.

I preach to you the Word of God under this *THEME:

BEAR FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE

I repeat...*

Crowds flocked to hear a prophet. For centuries no prophet had spoken. Finally an austere man of God in camel's hair with a leather belt stood up to convey the words of God. Was it not wonderful that multitudes came to listen? Is it not a wonderful feeling when the church-building is packed to the rafters? The sexton seeks every available chair even those in the consistory room? Yes, it is a good feeling, but...!

Yes, but! The forerunner of Jesus knew the deceit of the human heart. Why did so many come; why did so many desire baptism? What was their motive? For God wants the heart, the proper attitude, as well as the deed itself.

Knowing their dishonesty, the herald in the desert blasted them with a clear trumpet call - "*you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" Though interested in the prophet, though desirous of baptism, John the Baptist calls the multitude "a brood of vipers." He was not impressed by the masses.

If we turn to the parallel text in Matth.3:7, we read the following,

but when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

In our text John addresses the crowds in general. In Matthew's account he speaks specifically to the leaders whom he calls a brood of vipers. Why the difference? Apparently many listeners shared the same outlook as their leaders. What else would you expect? Teachers instruct others by their words and lifestyle; you expect their pupils to follow suit.

These leaders came to capture the increasing movement, this revival of faith, for themselves. Yet instead of receiving a warm welcome, the prophet of God tells them in no uncertain terms why God locates his ministry in the wilderness far away from the established church-gatherings at the beautiful temple square. They represent the offspring of vipers. They are the offspring or brood of vipers/serpents because they follow their original predecessor - the Serpent who deceived Adam and Eve. They have now in turn deceived the people whom they lead. The Slanderer stands behind these multitudes.

For why do they come for baptism? John implies that they have been warned to flee the coming wrath of God. A fear of judgment drives them to the desert. Wanting no risks, they request baptism like a type of insurance policy. Is it not better to be covered against all hazards?

No one likes to pay big premiums in order to be insured. Yet one does not want to be caught out either. So we pay. We are covered for theft, for fire, for accidents caused by others and by us.

Are you covered? Are you protected against the coming wrath? It comes! Though many mock it, the coming judgment is certain. Flee to God. Do not flee from God.

Allow me to explain that. Many, instead of fleeing to God, flee away from God, scared of the coming wrath. As long as they are baptised, all is well. In case this stern prophet is correct, we had better line up to be washed. One can never be too sure. They fled away from God. They treat the sign and seal as an insurance policy.

Please remember that the Lord had never required baptism of Israel. Circumcision as a sign of the cutting away of the sinful flesh sufficed. Here comes a man of God demanding baptism - a sign implying that they were unclean, unwashed, impure. Now unclean and uncircumcised Gentiles who had adopted the faith of Israel had been baptised, but not the Jews, the chosen race. Yet this austere voice in the wilderness demands that even Jews cleanse themselves. They must undergo the sign and seal of baptism in the murky Jordan. What an indictment of the chosen race! Can you not understand why the leaders and many of their company hesitated; why many queued for it only half-heartedly? They preferred to take no risks, as we said.

This type of reasoning reminds us of the Church of Rome which believes that the water of baptism itself washes away all sin. They say that the ritual itself automatically cleanses one. That is pure superstition. But if you believe it, why not present yourself and your children for baptism? Though it may only be a custom or superstition, it cannot do any harm. That attitude deserves the strong rebuke which John gave it. Our baptismal form too rebukes anyone who tries the same. Do not present your children for baptism out of custom or superstition. What John the Baptist preaches impresses that lesson on us.

Those who attempt to deceive God and themselves belong to the company of the Serpent. John and Jesus minced no words about these devil-inspired leaders and company, calling them "*sons of the evil one*" (Mt.13:38) and children of their "*father the devil*" (John 8:44). John describes them as a *brood of vipers*. Vipers apparently are small but very poisonous snakes, grabbing someone by means of their poisonous fangs which stick like glue.

You may recall that Paul, when shipwrecked on the island of Malta, had a viper stick with its fangs to him. All the natives thought he would die for sure.

Vipers! Like vipers, Pharisees and Sadducees fastened to their followers with their deadly hypocrisy and base treachery. They replaced God's commands with their own traditions; they loaded the people down with scores of extra human commands, all human deductions or conclusions they drew from the biblical laws of Moses, while they declined to keep those commands themselves. Jesus pronounced a heap of woes on them for such hypocrisy. But can you imagine the impact John's words had on those self-righteous crowds led by strict pharisees? "*A brood of vipers!*" For "*who warned them to flee the coming wrath?*" John suggests but does not specify. Brothers and sisters, you know who deceived them. Maybe there was a human messenger. We are not told. Yet behind the human messengers stands the Serpent, the Liar! Have you ever noticed how the Liar "whispers" his communications, while the herald broadcasts it. The truth makes one free to say it out loud.

This horrible indictment needs to scare us too. Let there be no formalism in our worship; no human deductions or conclusions which we draw with our own 'reformed' logic; no multiplying of rules and traditions which trample the freedom of Christ underfoot; no deceit; no masquerading as genuine followers of God while we really serve the Serpent! For remember that the pharisees and their followers were the most respected leaders among Israel. They were strict and straight. Though they might be harsh and demanding, imposing various rules on the people, no one accused them of false doctrine. If you would ask them whom they served they would immediately answer - the LORD God! If you asked them their norm, they would hold up the Torah, the Law, the Bible. Yet John denounced their religion, branding them and their company as a brood of vipers. Let that fact penetrate our consciences. For we too are considered strict and straight; we too are considered to be demanding; we too have accumulated quite a few customs and rules deduced from the Bibles; and we too feel that we are the chosen race.

So to whom do you belong - the Serpent or the Savior? Where is your heart?

What story do your deeds tell? For your actions underline what you believe. A tree is known by its fruit, as Jesus said. "*Bear fruits befitting repentance.*" Brothers and sisters, John the Baptist did not condemn them for fleeing the imminent judgment. Rather, he rejects the way in which they try to escape that judgment. Without removing sins and without heartfelt sorrow they still wish to be baptised as a sign of God's forgiveness. This penetrating prophet will have none of such a charade. It is like spraying the leaves of a fruit tree for fruit fly, while the tree suffers from a disease which will cause all the fruit to rot. Remove the disease first. The passage we read in Jeremiah stressed that message. There too Judah hoped to escape imminent judgment; they relied on false hopes; and they trusted in their privileges as the chosen race with whom the LORD dwelled in the temple. So they did not see the need to change, to repent of their evil habits.

John too demanded "repent!" That involved a total and radical transformation, a return to heartfelt obedience to God and his teachings in the OT. Brothers and sisters, repentance and conversion are similar terms.

You confess your need to be converted - to put to death the old habits of your old natures and to adopt a new lifestyle according to the Word of God. You know that this involves more than a passing regret, a few tears, a short-lived feeling, a few sighs and groans, an excuse or two, a wish to be different or a resolve to better one's life by one's own efforts.

Think of Martin Luther and his condemnation of the sale of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins and an early release from purgatory. Without any repentance, without any real sorrow, and without any amendment of life someone could buy forgiveness with a coin. As the coin dropped in the box the soul jumped from the fire of purgatory, said the indulgence hawkers. How he objected to that! We still object to that practice.

No wonder John demands the 'proof of the pudding,' fruit worthy of repentance. In the following passage John specifies what fruit he means - let the masses share tunics and food with the poor, let tax collectors collect only the appointed portion and no more, and let soldiers be content with their pay, not resorting to violence and intimidation. Show in your own work, in your own stations in life at home and at work, that you sincerely repent and desire to escape God's judgment. Let your actions match your words. Align your life with the teachings and commandments of our Lord.

To impress this need for sincere repentance God's messenger roots out any false hopes they might cherish.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

By experience John knew the thoughts circulating in the minds of some listeners. They thought:

Does the Day of the LORD and the coming Messiah not mean freedom for us, the people of God? Is the Messiah not going to judge the gentiles, the heathens who do not have the Law nor keep it? Is the wrath of the Messiah not exclusively reserved for them? Will we as the chosen race not be protected, just as we were in Egypt? None of those plagues touched Israel. Are we not Abraham's descendants? Certainly God cannot destroy the seed of Abraham, for then Abraham would be robbed of his posterity!

John unmask all these false assurances which they hugged so tightly. At one time the Jews felt sure that no judgment would touch the temple - remember Jeremiah 7. Casting out the deceitful worshippers, God even allowed the holy temple to be destroyed. All their assurances proved baseless. John does exactly the same by reminding the multitudes that God can make the desert stones into children for Abraham - God does not need the Jews, contrary to what many still believe re the revival of the Jewish nation.

Some may be alarmed at this message, for it seems to undermine the importance of the covenant God makes with us and our children. For descendancy from Abraham does not seem to count here. That God cut his covenant with Israel does not seem to count either. Are the baptists then correct that only those who truly repent and believe have a covenant with God? Are only grown-ups who produce fruit worthy of repentance included in that covenant? Does John degrade that covenant which we love and mention

so often? Brothers and sisters, that is not the point. John uproots the false security in human descent from Abraham. The equivalent for us would be to say - "I am baptised, I am a covenant child, so nothing can harm me; I can live as I please!"

No, if you will recall the Form for Baptism, the covenant obliges us to a new birth, regeneration, repentance and faith. It is not a pillow to fall asleep on.

To return to John's words about descent from Abraham, we know that blessings for the whole world would come through Abraham, through the seed of Abraham - our Lord Jesus Christ. Outside this seed of Abraham there is no salvation. John, choosing his words carefully, stated the same - "*God is able to raise up from these stones children to Abraham.*" God would not forget his promise to the patriarch. Even if the Jews are cut off, God would still give him many nations of children - through our Lord Jesus Christ, his seed. Or to use the language of Paul in Romans 11 branches may be cut off the original, cultivated olive tree and wild shoots may be grafted into it, but it would be into the old olive tree, into Abraham.

Yet the main point is do not rely on false hopes, do not treat the covenant as an automatic guarantee of escape from judgment.

Some still did not see the need for personal repentance. To them he said,

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Time pressed. God will not postpone judgment. It begins with the household of God. The 'axe' stood for judgment, the wrath of God to come soon. We use a similar expression - "he got the axe." Well, that axe was poised to hit the root of the trees. Not only will branches and twigs be pruned, the tree will come down. A drastic judgment comes. There is no time to lose.

That is a wholesome message. Many postpone a decision to lead a godly life, as many thought was possible in John's days. Why the hurry? All this scare-mongering, scare tactics, did not frighten them. There is time plenty. Some postpone it till they settle down and get married; others postpone it indefinitely. They will sin with pleasure and repent at leisure. Though the crowds may not have expressed it that crudely, that is often the point. To such I say with John - "*the axe is already laid to the root of the trees.*" If that was true in those days, what about today!?

How do we apply this to ourselves? We have already stressed the need for sincere repentance and we have already exposed false hopes. Now John adds the urgent warning - there is no time to waste, judgment is at hand. We know that John did not understand how and when God would exactly execute his judgment. The final judgment is still to come; it comes...soon!, maybe sooner than we think.

In the past year we witnessed many calamities - earthquakes, wars, rumors of war, cyclones, destructive tsunamis and overwhelming devastation. Jesus comes!

Let us not be lulled to sleep. God's final judgment, his coming wrath, is a terrible reality. How will you escape that judgment and again be received into God's favor?

Believe in Christ crucified for sinners; and demonstrate your repentance by actions befitting a true believer. Amen.