

Turning Around

Luke 3: 7 – 18

December 13, 2009

I. Introduction

A. You children of the evil serpent!

1. You know that the Lord will return – are you ready?

a. If not, you need to repent and turn from your wicked ways

A. Don't just say you are sorry, prove it by your actions

1. I don't want to hear any more of this – "I grew up in the church"

a. Or, "I became a church member when I was little"

2. And by the way, God doesn't care about your Anabaptist ancestry

a. God can turn every one of the stones in the parking lot into an Anabaptist

3. If you are not showing the fruit of God's righteousness in your life

a. The whole lot of you will be cut down like a dead apple tree

(1) Chopped up, thrown on a bonfire, and burned up

A. If you recall the words of our text, your response at this point is supposed to be –

1. "What then should we do?" And not just your response, but my response as well

II. We spoke last Sunday about the angelic pronouncements of the birth of two baby boys

A. We are most familiar with the announcement of the birth of baby Jesus

1. And we look forward to celebrating that birth at Christmas time each year

A. The first pronouncement, however, was the birth of the baby John

1. To the elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth

A. And you may remember that I mentioned

1. That it was a good thing that his parents knew this baby had a special calling in life

A. Because John turned out to be rather unusual - a wild and crazy sort of man

1. Living out in the wilderness, dressing like a cave man, eating what he could find

a. And preaching to whoever would listen – Repent, and have your sins forgiven!

(1) Prepare a way for the Lord; He is coming!

A. If I started every sermon the way I did this morning - the way that John preached

1. I wonder if it would attract a crowd, or if someone would be on the telephone

a. Calling for the men in white suits to come take me away?

2. I'm guessing Zechariah and Elizabeth might have had some of those same fears

a. As they heard the stories about what their son was doing

A. But John was passionate about something/someone that he knew was coming

1. And the people who came out to hear him preach realized something, too
 - a. God was bursting into the world, their world!
 - (1) And they needed to wake up and do something about it
- A. I need to stop here for a moment and make a confession
 1. Ever since I heard about this year's Advent theme of "Bursting In and Breaking Out"
 - a. I've been contemplating the possibility of having a balloon up here
 - (1) And popping it just as I was talking about God bursting into our world
 2. There's at least two reasons that I decided against doing that this morning
 - a. One – I would really hate to be the cause of heart failure/heart attack
 - (1) Popping a balloon this close to the microphone would be really loud
 - b. Two – I didn't want to be responsible for waking up the babies in the nursery
 - (1) In case they have the sound turned up back there
 - (a) That's one thing I've been told is a really bad thing for a pastor to do
- A. So, let me just repeat those last few words that I spoke
 1. And let you imagine the loud, unexpected popping sound
- A. John the Baptist was passionate about something that he knew was happening
 1. And the people who came out to hear him preach realized something, too
 - a. God was bursting (POP!!!) into the world, their world!
 - (1) And they needed to wake up and do something about it
- A. Because those people weren't thinking about the Messiah coming
 1. As a cute little baby in a manger, the way we think about Christmas
- A. They were thinking that God was coming to bring judgment on his people
 1. And the question they asked suddenly became very important –
 - a. What do we need to do to get ready for the coming of the Lord?
- A. I believe that's a question we should ask ourselves from time to time
 1. And it seems especially appropriate during this season of Advent
 - a. When we anticipate, and look forward to the celebration
 - (1) Of Jesus' birth into our world – Immanuel, God with us
 - b. And, as we are reminded of the promise that Jesus will come again
- A. Now I'm not suggesting that we should question our salvation
 1. That is one of the devil's favorite tricks, and he is quite good at it
- A. If we have repented, confessed our sin, and asked God for forgiveness
 1. Then we can rest in the assurance that God has done everything necessary

- a. For us to live in a close relationship with him
 - (1) God's promises are sure, and there is no reason for uncertainty there
- A. Rather, the question we should ask is this – if God is bursting into our world
 - 1. Or perhaps I should say – since God is still bursting into our world today
 - a. What needs to change in my life, in preparation for, or as a reflection of
 - (1) The presence of Jesus in my heart and in my life?
 - 2. What is getting in the way of my readiness to receive God's kingdom
 - a. And the reign of the Messiah over everything that I am and have?
 - 3. Or, another way we might ask the same question –
 - a. What is keeping me from experiencing the fullness of God's joy
 - (1) As I look for, and experience, the coming of Jesus into my world?
- A. We sometimes, or at least I sometimes, tend to spiritualize the idea of repentance
 - 1. Generalize sin as something that I know I'm guilty of
 - a. As in – I know I'm not perfect, because I'm still human
 - 2. But John got a lot more specific in his answer to the question
 - a. What do we need to do?
- A. Whoever has "more than enough", to borrow a term from Lynn Miller
 - 1. Must share with those who are lacking
- A. Be honest in your business dealings, he said to the tax collectors
 - 1. And to the soldiers he said - Don't take advantage of others because of your position or power
 - a. I wonder what he would have said to me
- A. A few years ago, in response to poll taken by USA Today magazine
 - 1. Forty-eight percent of American workers admitted to taking unethical or illegal actions in the past year.
- A. The five most common types of unethical/illegal behavior that workers said they had engaged in were:
 - 1. Cutting corners on quality control
 - 2. Covering up incidents of fraud in the workplace
 - 3. Abusing or lying about sick days
 - 4. Lying to or deceiving customers
 - 5. Putting inappropriate pressure on subordinate co-workers
- A. Those don't sound like such major sins, do they

1. But I believe they are symptomatic of a bigger problem in our society
 - a. And those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus are not immune to it
- A. It can be so easy to get the notion that work, or school, or home life
 1. Anything outside of what we do on Sunday, or connected with the church
 - a. Operates under a different set of rules than what we profess to believe
 - (1) Are the rules of God's kingdom
 2. As in – I wouldn't think of breaking any of the ten commandments
 - a. But fudging on an income tax return, or cheating on a math test
 - (1) Well, everybody does that some times
- A. But John doesn't make that distinction
 1. Repentance involves all of life, not just our beliefs on Sunday
- A. And Luke records his final words of warning – When the Messiah comes
 1. He will come with a winnowing fork in his hand
 - a. We might think of a combine, if you're not familiar with a winnowing fork
 2. He will thresh the wheat from the chaff, or the straw
 - a. The wheat will be gathered into his storehouse
 - (1) But the straw will be burned with unquenchable fire
- A. Again, that image of Jesus is so different from what we are used to seeing
 1. In our Christmas celebrations, that it might cause us to wonder
 - a. Was John mistaken? Was he talking about someone else?
 2. Is this really the same baby Jesus who came to bring peace and joy to the world?
- A. But John also mentions another aspect of Jesus' coming
 1. I baptize you with the water of repentance, he said
 - a. But the Messiah will baptize you with the Holy Spirit of God **and with fire**
 - (1) That is totally different from the unquenchable fire that burns forever
 2. This is the powerful, cleansing, purifying fire of the Spirit
 - a. That takes away the guilt of our sin
 - (1) And breaks the power of our sinful human nature
 - b. So that we can change from our wrong attitudes and actions
 - (1) And become the people God desires for us to be
- A. Yes, it is the same Jesus, and a part of the wonder of Christmas is the fact
 1. That this Christ child came to earth
 - a. Backed by all the power and authority of heaven

- (1) In the form of a helpless human baby
 - 2. God does not force us to change our will or our behavior
 - a. Instead, God invites us to repent, to turn around
 - (1) And gives us the power to make those changes in our lives
 - (a) Power that we do not have on our own
 - A. Some of you will remember the popular cartoon strip, Calvin and Hobbes
 - 1. If not, imagine a little spike-haired boy and his talking stuffed animal
 - A. In one cartoon, Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."
 - 1. "Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes suggests.
 - a. Calvin ponders this for a moment and replies, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."
 - A. True repentance always leads to action, to change, to going in a different direction
 - 1. That's what John the Baptist was calling for in the wilderness by the Jordan River
 - a. And I believe that is what we are still called to today
 - A. A.W. Tozer wrote these words - God will take nine steps toward us, but he will not take the tenth. He will incline us to repent, but he cannot do our repenting for us.
 - 1. That step we must do for ourselves
- III. I do not know where each of you is at this morning in your relationship with Jesus
- A. But if the Spirit of God is prompting you, telling you or reminding you
 - 1. Of something that you need to repent, to turn away from
 - a. I want to encourage you to do that, before you walk out these doors
 - A. We celebrate the unexpected coming of Jesus into the world some 2000 years ago
 - 1. But we also believe that he is coming again, and we do not know when
 - a. We do not know if we will have a tomorrow, another day, or even another hour
 - A. If you are sensing the need for God's forgiveness, whether for the very first time
 - 1. Or for some specific sin that the Holy Spirit is bringing to your mind
 - a. I invite you to come down here to the front of the sanctuary
 - (1) If you are not able to do that, then raise your hand where you are
 - 2. Your action will represent that you are serious with God
 - a. And I will be glad to pray with you if you so desire
 - A. Come, while I lead us in prayer, let my words of confession become your words
 - 1. Or come while we read responsively the Litany that will follow

- a. Tap someone close to you on the shoulder and ask them to come with you
 - (1) It's what we're all about as Christian brothers and sisters
- 2. Whatever you do, don't go away from here this morning
 - a. With unresolved sin in your heart
- A. Because even a "little" sin that is not dealt with will rob us of God's joy
 - 1. The Christmas story, the holiday season, offers us hope, and peace and joy
 - a. But only when we have allowed Jesus to turn our lives around
 - 2. Only when we allow the Holy Spirit's fire to cleanse us and make us pure
- A. Then we can say with assurance – God is bursting into our world
 - 1. And we can truly rejoice
 - a. Come as we pray
- A. God, you sent your servant John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus
 - 1. To call the people to repentance and new life in you
 - a. You continue to send your messengers to us today
 - 2. And we hear your call, not as a voice crying in the wilderness
 - a. But as that little voice crying out in the barren places of our heart
 - 3. Show us what needs to change in our lives
 - a. So that we can experience your peace and joy
 - (1) Let the fire of your Holy Spirit burn within us
 - (a) To bring conviction and the desire to turn around
 - 4. We come before you this morning to show our repentance
 - a. We confess the sin that is in our heart and our life
 - (1) Attitudes and actions that cause hurt instead of healing
 - 5. We come to give all that to you and ask for your forgiveness
 - a. So that our lives might be prepared for your coming into our world
 - (1) And prepared for that time when you come again
 - (a) To take your people home to be with you
- A. Let's continue our prayer as we share the Litany of Response together
 - 1. And in the singing of our Hymn of Response