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Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Good Fruit for Good Fruit”

Text: Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13

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

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. . . . 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.

And if you need evidence of that, John could have said, *just look around*. Where is Israel? The nation of Israel? The nation of Israel which was a big, glorious, powerful tree at the time of David and Solomon? Where is it now? Chopped down. To a stump. ***The stump of Jesse***, Isaiah called it. Because they did not bear good fruit. They turned away from God and to other gods. They would not repent, even though God sent prophet after prophet after prophet to call them to repentance. So the axe came. First the axe of God called Babylon, and then Assyria. And now, instead of a nation of Israel, the Jews were ruled by the Romans.

Bear fruit - good fruit - in keeping with repentance.

With these words John teaches us something about repentance. Namely this: *that repentance isn't just words*. There's more to it than that. Repentance and forgiveness is meant to produce a new life in us. A life that produces good fruit. Which is to say, **we don't repent to get AWAY with our sin, but to get OUT of our sin and get our sin OUT of us, and to graft us INTO a new life**. That instead of sinful fruit coming out of us, good fruit come out instead.

This means seeing sin not just as a flaw or a mistake we make, something harmless or a matter of choice, but as a disease that we don't want to live with, that we want **OUT** of us. Or seeing sin like pests that live in your house - you don't want to live with them, you don't want to make peace with them, you want them **OUT**. But I'm not sure we always see sin that way . . . That it is not useful, but corrosive. Not pleasant, but harmful. Not a minor flaw, but a disabling defect. Not a choice, but a slavery. That gossip, that guilty pleasure you indulge in, that rebellion, that taking advantage of another, that little indiscretion, those words that would have been better left unsaid . . . maybe helped you get ahead or get what you want, but at what

cost? What cost to you and your conscience, which each sin hardens a little more? What cost to your relationship with others? What cost to your relationship with God?

Turns out, the cost is quite high. **The price: the life of God's own Son.**

But that was a price Jesus was willing to pay **for you**. The greatness of His love *for you* for exceeding the greatness of the sin *in you*. That's why, really, we celebrate Christmas. It's not first and foremost for the gifts under the tree, **but for the Son who hung on it** - on the tree of the cross.

And so from the chopped down stump of Israel - ***the stump of Jesse***, David's father - a little shoot would begin to grow. Unnoticeable at first. Born not in the big city, in Jerusalem, but in the little town of Bethlehem. Born not to royalty, but in poverty. A little child who would lead us back to Paradise and peace. A little child who, as Isaiah prophesied, would be BOTH a *branch* from the root of Jesse (v. 1) AND the *root* of Jesse (v. 10). BOTH growth from an old, dead-looking stump AND its root, its source of life. But how can that be? How can you be BOTH the root AND the branch of a tree? **You can if this little child is both God and man.** God, the root, the source of life, and a man, a branch, descended from men.

So once that branch started to grow, God sent one more prophet. His last and final Old Testament prophet - John the Baptist - whose job was to prepare the way for this Saviour. *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry, announces that the Lord is nigh* (LSB #344). The Baptist points to Jesus and says, *Look! There's a branch growing! From the stump of Jesse, from and in Israel. **The kingdom of heaven is at hand!** Heaven has come down to us in this one. This one **whose sandals I am not worthy to carry**. Don't make the same mistake your fathers made. Repent. For there's a worse judgment coming. A final judgment. Not just a chopping down, but a burning **with unquenchable fire**. So repent and believe. Repent and be baptized.*

That kind of repentance is more than just getting away with your sin. It involves seeing things differently. Seeing with God's eyes, not your own. Hearing what He says, and believing it. That this path I'm on is not good. That I need to change - a change that might not be easy, but is good for me. A change of heart, a change of mind, a change of life.

That the Pharisees and Sadducees did not - did not repent and believe, did not see a need for change, is why John called them **a brood of vipers**. That is, offspring of a snake, a serpent. They were fulfilling a Word of God from all the way back in the beginning, when God said there would be enmity between the offspring of the Eve and the offspring (the brood) of the serpent (the viper). Yup. Here it is. But that also

means that here is the promised offspring of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head. It was all coming together there that day at the Jordan River. The time of the rescue, the saving had come. So John was preparing the way. Repent and believe. Repent and be baptized. And ***bear fruit in keeping with repentance***.

Now if we jump to the Epistle we heard today, from Paul's letter to the Romans, he said that ***whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope***. So this is for our instruction today, this Second Sunday of Advent. John's preaching was not just for the people at the Jordan then, but for us who gather around this Baptismal Font today. That our baptism and our repentance be not just words, and not just going through the motions, but life-changing. That we ***bear fruit in keeping with repentance*** and have hope. The hope of eternal life, yes. But more than that: the hope of a new life now. A new life in Christ.

Because God doesn't want that unquenchable fire for anyone. Jew or Gentile. Paul was clear about that, because the Old Testament was clear about that. God is the God of all and the Saviour of all and who loves all people. If He disciplines us, like He did in chopping down Israel, it is for our good. Which we know not just because of His Word, but because of He did. Because when that branch from the stump of Jesse grew up into the tree, the man Jesus, He was chopped down for us and suffered the unquenchable fire of God's wrath against our sin in our place. And again, not so we could get AWAY with our sin, but to get our sin OUT of us.

So why jump back into the fire of sin! That doesn't really make sense, does it? But that's what we do when we return to our sin. When instead of living as the baptized children of God we are and ***bearing good fruit in keeping with repentance***, we bring forth the rotten fruit of sin.

But when you do - and as long as we live on this side of eternity, we all do! We all do dumb things, dumb sins. And make no mistake about it, sin is dumb! You might think you're pretty smart, outsmarting your parents or your spouse, outmaneuvering your neighbor or your boss, or even God . . . getting what you want, doing what you want . . . but you're not, smart. No, sin is dumb. That's why satan tempts you to do it. Do you really think He's going to tempt you to do something that's smart and good for you? *Really?* Or is he conning you? Making a fool of you? Drawing you back into his slavery, and away from God?

So when you fall back into old sinful habits and old sinful ways, when you're dumb and follow your old, sinful spirit, listen to the Spirit of God and do something smart - return to your Baptism and the promises of God given you there. That's where the Spirit was given to you. That's where the Spirit is pulling you back. The Spirit that is

not dumb, but as Isaiah said, is ***the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord***. The Spirit given you to raise you up from your sin and back to life in Christ. The Spirit given you that you no longer be controlled by your sin and sinful desires, but have the mind of Christ. The Spirit who dwells in kings and tax collectors, in prophets who wear camel's hair coats and eat locusts and wild honey, as well as scientists and engineers. The Spirit who dwells in children still learning to walk, and the elderly who no longer can. The Spirit by whose power you abound no longer in sin, but in hope and joy and peace.

Hope, joy, and peace that resting in Jesus and confident of His love, now produces the good fruit that He desires, ***good fruit in keeping with repentance***. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and chastity.

And if you don't see those fruits in your life, or not enough of them - and none of us have enough of them! - then come eat the fruit from the tree of the cross. The best fruit there is - the Body and Blood of Jesus. **Because as much as we want that life-stealing sin OUT of us, even more do we want the life-giving Body and Blood of Jesus IN us**. That His coming to us now, here, prepare us for His coming again in glory. And prepared for his coming again in glory, we are prepared to remember and celebrate His first coming in the flesh for the good news it really is.

Which makes this a perfect Advent Scripture. Preparing us for Jesus. Our Saviour coming to us with the greatest gift of all - life. His life given for us then, His life give to us now, that we might live. A new life. A life of faith and fruit. So *come, Lord Jesus!* we pray this season. Come, and work that in me.

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.