



JESUS' BAPTISM  
JANUARY 10/11, 2015  
(PSALM 2:7-8)

MATTHEW 3:1-17  
FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

*Worthy Fruit*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Please join me in prayer: Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### ***Bear fruit worthy of repentance...*** (Matthew 3:8)

It's critical for **any public speaker** to know **something** about the people who are **listening**. This is true for **every** arena, from comedy to campfire tales, writing to reporting, texting to teaching, and politics to preaching. In fact, the **seminary** has begun requiring its students to take a class entitled, *Reading the Audience*.

Its aim is to help pastors learn about their ministry setting, how to grasp the particularities of:

- a place, its people and its personality,
- its times of testing and its times of triumph.

Such things are vital for pastors to know as we preach and teach to help people make sense of God's call in their lives.

...The seminary did not offer that course back in the dark ages when I was a student, so... I got to learn it the hard way! Here's one example.

My previous congregation was in Anchorage, Alaska. As 58 of our First Lutheran *kids-and-adults* experienced up there last summer, the scenery is gorgeous, the people are great, and salmon plays a key role in the state's economy. One of my first sermons there was about Jesus feeding the 5,000 using five loaves of bread and two fish – you know the story.

**I had a great idea** for a **children's** sermon: I had a can of fish for my illustration, the message was short and sweet – *what could go wrong?* Well, I learned a lot about Alaska that day from one little boy. He took a look at my can of fish, shook his head and said in a loud voice, “My dad says we **never** eat tuna – only salmon!”

Looking at our Bible story for today, it **appears** that John the Baptist missed **his** *Reading the Audience* class! Look at verse 7. *But when (John) saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*

Granted, the Pharisees and Sadducees were constant pains in John's side. Where the **Sadducees** were the upper crust of society and wanted to protect their financial and political security, the **Pharisees** were the piety patrol, eager to make sure that **all** people lived their lives by **their** understanding of the law. That *in itself* is not a **bad** thing, but it can lead to something bad, right?

**Tell me what can happen to good people who expect everyone else to live by their strict religious code...**

They can become judgmental, intolerant, uncaring, inhuman even – (take a look at what happened in France this week...!)

So that's why John lets loose at them with **both barrels**. Granted, these are people who hiked all the way out into the desert to hear him preach... The **trouble** is they weren't coming to confess their sins and repent of their failings. They were on a recon mission, scouting the enemy, trying to assess how serious a threat John posed to their power in society, to their comfortable way of life.

*You brood of vipers!* John didn't give a **fig** about being warm and welcoming, caring and compassionate, understanding or eager to

get to know **his** listeners... Then again...**maybe** he knew them well, **maybe** he was **reading his audience perfectly**...

***Bear fruit worthy of repentance...*** (Matthew 3:8)

MOTIVATION will be an issue we hear again and again in Matthew's gospel. From here all the way to Easter, and beyond to Pentecost, Matthew is going to ask us if we're truly seeking a life of faith in Jesus Christ, or if we're more like the Pharisees and Sadducees...

- always testing the waters with a toe...
  - and never quite taking that leap of faith;
- always open to the idea of serving God...
  - but never actually following where God is leading;
- always supporting the call to love our neighbors...
  - but never extending that love to people we don't like...

***Bear fruit worthy of repentance...*** (Matthew 3:8)

John issues a call here to all people that they should **repent**... So let's get down to the basics. Someone help me out here: **What does the word REPENT mean?**

-It literally means to stop in your tracks, turn 180 degrees around and start moving in the opposite direction.

So, let's take a moment and **imagine** ourselves in that place with John the Baptist. We're in a Mediterranean climate...standing near a river – the grass is green, the flowers are blooming, the trees are filled with ripe, juicy fruit, the sun is bright and warm...

Where was I going with that??? Note to self: in the middle of a Minnesota winter, don't invite the congregation to fantasize about

someplace warm!!! *You may not get yourself out of it!* OK - take 2. Imagine that you're standing in the wilderness...

You heard the **news**, you felt a tug at your **heart**, you became part of a *flash mob* gathering in the desert to experience this amazing moment. Help me out here: **What exactly is John telling you to do? What does he mean by bear fruit worthy of repentance?**

Exactly! It's not rocket science. It's not brain surgery. It's not a secret. It's simple – the essence of the 10 commandments: *Love God, and love your neighbor*. It's what we learned around the supper table, in the sand box and here at Sunday School...

**So how's that simple command working for you...AND how's it working for our world???**

*The problem is there's something missing, right?*

Repentance requires:

- the *desire* to change and
- the *decision* to change

But **knowing** what's **needed** to change...is a far cry from actually *changing*... As I mentioned in my children's sermon, there are two basic motivations for change. The one is a **threat**, a **law** with consequences attached: *do this or else*. The other is **grace**: those who are loved are able to love.

In the end, the only thing a **law** can do is regulate our behavior – so like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we can *say-and-even-do* all the right things, and still never let God's Word of grace touch our hardened hearts. There's no way that a law can ever warm-up our cold emotions, inspire our sinking spirits or stir us to serve our neighbors...out of love

Thankfully, today's story does **not** end with... a dead end, another helping of the law that will leave us feeling frustrated and faithless. Instead, says Matthew:

*<sup>16</sup>And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*

There truly is **no better good news** than this, when God says to the universe, '*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*' For here's the **blow-your-mind, start-your-heart, ignite-your-spirit** good news: *God speaks those very same words to you – and to me – out of love for Jesus Christ.*

God looks at us in love – sees Jesus' Spirit dwelling within – and says, ***You are my son, you are my daughter, my beloved; with you I am well pleased!***

Now God's **not** pleased with us for who we have the potential to be, who we should try to be, or even for who we truly want to be... This is the **scandal** of the Gospel, the **irony** of grace, the **mind-boggling blast** from heaven that blows away every trace of our attempts to somehow get ourselves into God's good graces.

No, against all odds, in the face of every scrap of proof, despite all evidence to the contrary... God looks at us through Jesus and says, ***You are mine! That*** is what makes repentance happen, what makes ***fruit worthy of repentance*** grow in our lives. It's the very essence of God's life-changing, heart-healing, spirit-lifting, forgiveness-giving gift of love.

So plug your ears to any whispers of doubt, to all cries that condemn, and to those fickle feelings that always fail us. Listen instead to this voice of Amazing Grace that gives us the fruit worthy of repentance: faith, hope and love. Then be delighted by all that you've been given to share – for the love of God – who truly loves you as beloved daughter or favored son, children of our Heavenly Father. Amen.