Text: Luke 3:1-20

**Introduction**

Terry Mattingly, a religion beat writer I love to read, who happens to be the son of a Baptist Preacher who is now Eastern Orthodox was pulling out some past material and reflected that just a few years ago if you asked Alexa or Siri when is the Advent Season? It wouldn’t know the word advent. It responded to him at the time, “I don’t know an Ed Fant.” Likewise if you asked when does the Christmas season end? It didn’t recognize the 12 days of Christmas. I asked the same questions of a couple modern AI’s and each did better. Both Grok and Microsoft Co-Pilot knew exactly what the Christmas season was: Christmas to Epiphany. Their Advent answers were a little garbled but essentially correct.

When the old protestant mainline ran the social calendar, and the Methodists and Presbyterians looked to the Episcopalians for their queues – advent had its space. I left out the Lutherans, because Lutherans are an “other” in American religion. We don’t really count, except when the Episcopalians wanted an outside voice to defend the liturgy. And then they usually regrated asking us. But that world started disappearing before I was born and probably had it’s last strength somewhere in the 1980s. About the same time the school’s started having Winter Concerts instead of Christmas. And we sang more songs about dreidels and snow than about the Magnum Mysterium.

The fading of the old mainline left two things to replace it. The Baptists, who never formally followed a church year calendar. And the corporations, whose calendar wanted Christmas gifts bought safely in the 4th quarter. Forget any 12th night celebrations, three kings bringing gifts, or anything else that might prevent making the year end bonus. And not even the Roman Catholics combined with the rest of us historical protestants have enough social heft to really fight against the corporations.

Which causes a problem. Advent is a necessary season. It’s themes of waiting, and preparation, and longing and hope are the closest we have to the situation of the church in this world. We always want to rush on to the feast day, the celebration. But what we risk when we do that is showing up at the wedding without the wedding garment. We risk the seed springing up fast, but not developing the root. And when the sun rises we wilt.

**Text**

So for those of us who are tasked with exhorting and encouraging faithful maturity in the people of God, there is a pincer. We know that you have to go through John the Baptist – you have to hear his message – before you get to the manger. But the entire world is singing Santa Baby and All I want for Christmas in You. If Alexa was answering the Christmas season as the world practices it she would answer starting the day after thanksgiving until the 25th. The city follows that, while we are out in the wilderness wearing camel hair and eating locust. Crying out in a loud voice, “prepare the way.”

Although if we are looking at Luke’s portrait of the Baptizer, he is kinder. Yes, John is in the wilderness, but he leaves out the odd clothes and diet. Luke concentrates on the Baptizer’s message. Isaiah poetically said that the voice of one crying the wilderness would say, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths…and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” And we might ask practically what does he mean by that?

And I think Luke shows us in the preaching and actions of the Baptizer. There are two parts. The first part is the apocalyptic warning. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.” And the second part starts when you’ve heard that warning. “What then shall we do?”

**Christological**

The core of the apocalyptic exhortation is “One who is mightier than I is coming.” And his coming is not some far off thing, but very near. And don’t think that you have standing to argue anything before him. To the Jews, don’t think that you can say “Abraham is our father.” Whatever it is you think that gives you standing before the coming one, don’t be so sure. “Even now the axe is at the root of the tree.”

As Malachi would say – and maybe you can hear Handel’s aire – “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appeareth. Like a refiner’s fire.”

The Apocalyptic is to wake you up. Advent is the solemn warning. The winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

This is all flesh seeing the salvation of God. When the LORD that the baptizer proclaims is coming there is a division. All flesh shall see the salvation. All flesh has seen the salvation. He was lifted up – lifted up on the cross for all flesh. While John baptized with water for repentance, here was the baptism of fire. And this salvation is displayed before all flesh. This is fire. The fire that either refines or burns away.

Now we might not like that image of fire, but it can be good news. God loves you enough he thinks of you as a precious metal – gold or silver. You are something worth refining. You are something worth coming to reap. You are worth sending messengers before him to prepare the way. The Holy Spirit calls all to the foot of this cross. The Holy Spirit calls all to this fire. The fire of repentance.

**Moral**

And that first act of refining is that question the crowds return – “What then shall we do?” If we can’t avoid the fire, how are we to endure the day of his coming? This is already the fruit of repentance. We know that we can’t stand. We know that we have dross to burn away. But what shall we do so that we are fruitful trees and not just kindling?

And the Baptizer’s answers to some representative voices from the crowd are not terrible. None of his answers are veneers of piety. He doesn’t say go on a pilgrimage. Nor are they extreme asks like Jesus would occasionally give. “Go, give away everything you have and follow me.” No, the Baptizer’s answers are modest. But they are targeted at presenting sins. If you have money – two tunics, plenty of food – share with those who have none. Our temptation is to trust the things of this world to provide. Even though the things of this world are often eaten by moth and rust. No, the only eternal things we see in this world are our fellow humans that are placed before us. If we want to have eternal treasure, use our temporal things for the good of the eternal. Use what we have for the good of our neighbor.

The tax collectors and soldiers – those who had a office and a charge. Carry out your office. Don’t abuse your office. To many of the crowd this would have been terrible. The tax collectors and soldiers were symbols of oppression and treason. But the Baptizer acknowledge that they have a legitimate office and charge. He doesn’t tell them to leave it. But to carry it out faithfully. Like using material goods for the good of our neighbor, use any authority we have been given for the good of our neighbor.

What then shall we do? How do we prepare the way of the LORD? We Love the LORD by loving our neighbor.

**Eschatological**

If we have heard the apocalyptic warnings. If we have seen the salvation of the LORD. Then we lives lives of preparation.

For the day is coming. The Kingdom of Heaven which has drawn near to you in grace, is coming in glory. Today is the day to make the paths straight, to fill the valley and bring down the mountain. Anything that separates us from Christ. Anything that we might desire more. And crooked place, that we kind of like that crookedness. Today is the day to hear the Word and prepare. Today is the day to Love the Lord your God by loving your neighbor. Today is the day to bear good fruit.

For tomorrow the day of grace is over and the Kingdom of Glory shall be revealed. And only that which has been refined will last.