

Title: Building Strong Roots for Healthy Fruits

Subtitle: John the Baptist's Advent Message

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/qE5jvFukkie>

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist encourages us to reflect on our lives as we prepare for the coming of the Lord. His message is timeless and urgent, ***"The ax is lying at the root of the trees."***¹ His metaphor deals with "root issues" that cut to the heart of authentic spiritual reality. John wants genuine, heartfelt transformation. He wants to build lives that have *strong roots and healthy fruits born from genuine repentance*.

You have to remember that John lived in a very religious culture that majored in all sorts of minor issues that had nothing to do with heartfelt faith. The Pharisees and Sadducees prided themselves on being sons of Abraham but had little connection to his life of faith. They hassled Jesus for all kinds of artificial traditions and manufactured religious rules, such as not healing people on the Sabbath or not washing your hands in a specified manner. Therefore, John had to shake people up and destroy their false sense of religious pride. His fiery message was carefully aimed at burning away the religiously superfluous chaff, which had no real value in nurturing genuine faith.

John began his ministry in the context of the Judean wilderness. The wilderness is a dry and thirsty place with little signs of life. It stood as a marvelous metaphor for the religious environment in which he lived. However, it also has many parallels to today's culture, which can leave people without a sense of identity and hope.

We all know that the Advent and Christmas seasons can be especially challenging for those who are grieving, lonely, and struggling financially. Any time of year is difficult for those in

¹ Luke 3:9

distress. But simply throwing tinsel and lights on the outside without attending to spiritual realities on the inside can leave people depressed. Therefore, the readings during this Advent season aim to bridge the gap between how things are and how they are supposed to be as we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The religious leaders that Jesus and John dealt with offered little in this regard. They looked holy on the outside with their robes and emblems of their spiritual achievements. Still, inwardly, they were unloving and intolerant toward anyone who didn't live up to all of their burdensome rules. They provided what I would call a "cut flower" religion that may have looked good on the outside for a while, but offered nothing that would sustain lasting fruit.

John's message cut at the heart and root of this disconnection. His message is timeless because it aims to help every generation build and maintain a vital connection with the Lord.

Just over twenty years ago, I received a call to serve a church of corporate size. I came, knowing that the church had serious financial problems. With their limited budget, I could not hire the staff needed to support the necessary programs for growth. In my efforts to pull the church out of its slump, I ran around trying to do everything. I wanted desperately to be a spiritual hero and turn things around. But after a year of trying to do everything, I was exhausted, and my friends began noticing something was wrong. People approached me and asked, "What has happened to you? You used to give such good messages. You don't seem to be the person we once knew when we first called you here."

I knew what they were saying was true. The joy I once had in serving the Lord seemed to have dried up. In the religious wilderness of my life, I had lost my spiritual center.

The call on my life is not just about working and serving others. I am also called to ***“keep watch over my own life and heart,”***² which includes keeping my first love for Christ alive.

Something similar to my dilemma is described in Francis Shaffer’s book ***True Spirituality: How to Live for Jesus Moment by Moment***. In it, Shaffer shares a personal testimony of how the church he was a part of endured a split as they tried to defend and contend for orthodoxy in their doctrine. Yet, the same church split away again in just six months. In his observation, he saw how people who held very orthodox views could turn around and be unloving and intolerant towards others. The very thing that Jesus declared should be the mark of true discipleship, which is love, was missing. This dichotomy of having orthodoxy without love produced a crisis of faith, where he felt he had to go back and reexamine everything. Eventually, he realized that orthodox belief has to be rooted in a relationship with God that connects a person with truth and his power.

John the Baptist points to this in today’s Gospel when he declares, ***“I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”***³

The Holy Spirit that Jesus gives helps us produce the fruits of the Spirit, which can’t be manufactured by human effort alone.

Our New Testament lesson from Philippians provides an excellent example of this when Paul tells us to ***“Rejoice in the***

² Acts 20:28 paraphased

³ Luke 3:16

Lord always. And again, I say, rejoice.⁴ Paul knew that without God's help, this admonition would be meaningless. Therefore, the very next verse provides a marvelous promise. ***“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”***⁵ The word that Paul used for gentleness is also the connotation of gracious and reasonableness that resist being irritable and violent.⁶ Paul was not unaware of the stresses and woes we face, for he wrote these words from a Roman prison. Yet, in all circumstances, we can rejoice because of what Christ has done and still promises to do for us as He lives near to us and dwells in us due to the presence of his Spirit that is promised.

In our Canticle today, Isaiah describes this manifestation of the Spirit when he exclaims, ***“Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day, you shall say, ‘Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name.’”***⁷ The Gospel writer affirms this call to joy by defining John's appeal as ***“good news.”*** It is good news because it brings with it a durable, Christ-centered joy as we prepare our hearts for Him.

Therefore, my prayer for all of us today is one that Paul shared in his letter to the Ephesians:

“that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses

⁴ Philippians 4:4

⁵ Philippians 4:5

⁶ Strong's Concordance, #1933 *epieikés* (ep-ee-i-kace'), mild, forbearing, fair, reasonable, moderate.

⁷ Isaiah 12:3

knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”⁸

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

⁸ Ephesians 3:14-21