

# Sermon Sparkler for Advent Three

There are two things that should jump out at us when we read Luke's description of John. Firstly, he is addressing a crowd, instead of the Religious Leaders. Secondly, he spells out a particular repentance program, the goal of which is fruitfulness.

John derides the crowd, reminding them that God can bring ancestors from the stones—a phrase Jesus uses after the resurrection of Lazarus when he enters Jerusalem. These stones are the ones often found on Jewish graves. He's saying God can resurrect a people for himself if that is God's will.

They ask, "What shall we do?" In Acts, the response to this question is always "get baptized." And we might expect the same here, especially from John the Baptizer. Instead, John gives first a general maxim about sharing with those in need as you are able. But he doesn't stop with the general, instead he gets down into particulars (the particulars are always where truly radical thought comes from, aren't they? It's not in the general idea, but in how it is lived out, that separates hypocrisy from moral genius).

He interacts with a tax collector (tax collectors show up five times in Luke's gospel). Now, tax collectors are sinners, stooges of Rome, collecting taxes from their own people for an imperial power that oppresses them. John's word to them is: "Don't take more than you are owed."

This was a common practice of the time; tax collectors were given an assigned amount of money they needed to collect, and they would collect even more. John warns against skimming off the top, extorting more than Rome asked the tax collector to collect.

So too, John addresses soldiers (another class of people on whom Luke focuses). Like tax collectors, these soldiers are collaborators with Rome, and like them they too can use their occupation as an excuse to line their pockets through extortion.

It's interesting that John doesn't call them out of their jobs, but instead calls on them to act ethically within a job where it is easy to act unethically.

- ✎ How might this passage open up a conversation about Vocation?
- ✎ How might the folk you are preaching to think about their roles and relationships in light of their faith?
- ✎ What might John's call to a repentant fruitful life say to the prevailing American philosophy of accumulating wealth and exercising power?
- ✎ What connections may be made between sharing with those in need and practicing our vocations ethically?