

*Zeph. 3:14–20*

*Isa. 12:2–6*

*Phil. 4:4–7*

**Luke 3:7–18**

# What Do We Do Now?

**Goal for  
the Session**

*Adults will explore connections between the good news John the Baptist proclaims with the good fruits John teaches.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

### Focus on Luke 3:7–18

**WHAT is important to know?**

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Mariam J. Kamell

Ultimately, Luke summarizes John’s message as good news (*euangelizō*), thereby including it within the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Indeed, John’s is not a separate message from that which Christ preached. Before one can receive the Spirit, before one can understand that Christ is Messiah, one must repent from self-sufficiency. Repentance is defined as humble obedience, the natural result of meeting with God and accepting the truth of the gospel. Consistently throughout Scripture, God called his people to repent, a call still resonating. John, as prophet to Jesus, teaches that repentance entails a life characterized by honesty and concern for those in need.

**WHERE is God in these words?**

— From “Theological Perspective,” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen

The Advent passage reminds us of the strange figure of the Baptist, who took the advent of the Messiah so dead seriously that nothing less than complete *metanoia* with an ethical U-turn was required. At the same time, the Advent passage presents to us the desert preacher who tied the advent of the Messiah to the eschatological advent of God. To that context belongs the promise of the baptism with the Spirit and fire. It is going to be an eschatological Spirit baptism. Whatever else the Spirit baptism may mean, in this passage it is a judging and cleansing act.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Wesley D. Avram

John calls the good works that make hearers worthy of their baptism “fruit” borne from the tree of their lives. It is not enough lazily to claim oneself the fruit of Abraham (or of the Roman army). It is not enough to presume that because one is a child of the church, a “good citizen,” or a person of status one is secure before God. Don’t confuse sitting on the limb with being either the tree or its fruit. For the tree might not be so strong or fruitful as one thinks.

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**

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The preacher might ask fellow worshipers, “Can anyone tell, by observing our lives, that we bear the mark of Christ and are living as his faithful disciples?” We must, according to John, live the faith we claim to possess. Authentic Christian living always has that challenge. “It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin. . . . What counts is your life” (vv. 8–9, *The Message*). While this may not be the challenge worshipers have come to hear in Advent worship, it is what John the Baptist offers.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 3:7–18**

## Focus on Your Teaching

By this session’s end, nine days will be left till Christmas! Consider what you and your group members would identify as most pressing on the “to-do list” in that remaining time: a final burst of shopping; a careful planning of gatherings; a traditional attending of services? When the list grows and the time shortens, we might ask what takes priority in our preparations. Today’s passage reflects a similar concern, as folks ask of John: “What then should we do?” Let that question serve as an organizing principle for your planning and leading of this session.

*Turn me, O God, to the words and works that you seek most: in my teaching, in my living. In Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- Advent wreath and four candles, lighter, table, cloth
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 23, 2018

### For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: collage materials (magazines, scissors, glue sticks, newspapers, poster board)

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*In advance of the session*, cover a table with a cloth. Place the Advent wreath and candles on top. If you choose to do option 3 in Responding, identify someone in your wider community who is a voice for such actions and ethics as summoned by John in Luke 3:10–14. Invite that individual to address and challenge your group with a call to such transformative actions today.

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Choose partners. Ask each pair to discuss these two questions:

- ✧ What activities in this season do you find most wearying; why?
- ✧ What activities in this season do you find most energizing; why?

Alert the partners halfway through the time allotted, so each question is covered and each person has a chance to speak.

Gather the whole group. Ask a third question for silent consideration:

- ✧ What activities in this season do you find most necessary for your practice of faith; why?

Light three of the candles on the Advent wreath. Note, as you light the third candle, that last Sunday’s “appearance” of John the Baptist continues today in an account of his preaching.

Offer the following prayer.

*What is it you would have us do, O God, this Advent? Besides fixing the dinners, and wrapping the packages, and singing the carols: how would you have us live? Amen.*

## EXPLORING

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine:

*You have made the long and steep walk from Jerusalem down to the Jordan River, a distance of at least 20 miles, involving a descent from over 3,000 feet above sea level to almost 1,000 feet below sea level. You have made this arduous journey to hear what John the Baptist would say to you, and to be baptized by him. You approach the river. John, clothed in camel hair, walks from the bank and greets you with these words:*

At this point, read aloud Luke 3:7–9. Have participants open their eyes and discuss their reactions to what they have just heard.

Form three groups. Assign each group one of the following sets of characters: crowds, tax collectors, soldiers. Explain that you will read Luke 3:10–14 aloud. As you do, groups are to listen from the perspective of the characters assigned to them. Write the following questions on a board or newsprint as a guide for listening—and then for small group discussion.

- ✪ What does John call upon you to do?
- ✪ How do John’s words make you feel: about John, about yourself, about God?

Read Luke 3:10–14 aloud. Have groups discuss those questions from the perspective of their assigned characters.

Gather the whole group. Invite each small group to offer a brief summary of their characters’ perspective on John’s message and call to action.

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Luke 3:15–18. Have participants identify what they understand to be the connections between this portion of the passage and summons to actions in verses 10–14. In particular, explore these questions:

- ✪ What is John himself trying to do in verses 15–18, and why?
- ✪ In terms of the whole passage: what call to action do you find in John’s words?

Have adults read silently the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. As needed, share information regarding “eschatology,” “Messiah/Christ” and messianic hopes contained in the sidebar. Also clarify that *metanoia* (used in the excerpt) is the Greek word translated in Luke 3:8 as “repentance.” Its literal meaning is “a change of mind.” Read the Old Testament lection for today (Zephaniah 3:14–20) as an example of eschatology and messianic hope.

- ✪ What in Zephaniah’s message might have caused its original listeners to have hope?
- ✪ And how might that hope have generated a change of mind (repentance) similar to John’s message?

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Messianic Ethics: The Fruits of Living with Hope). Give participants time to read it. Ask:

- ✪ If you had the opportunity, what question would you ask John about his answers to the questions put to him of “What then should we do?”

*Eschatology* is a scholar’s word for “end time.” The Greek word for “Messiah” is *Christ*, which literally means “anointed.” Messianic hopes at the time of Jesus were high. Some people hoped that Messiah would be a warrior who would restore the nation’s freedom.

Invite adults to imagine John the Baptist transported into your community setting: local congregation as well as wider community.

- ✦ What might John say today about what constitutes “fruits worthy of repentance”?
- ✦ How would such actions reflect the hope we celebrate this season?

EASY  
PREP

A collage is an artistic grouping of pictures, drawings, and/or words on a newsprint or poster board, used to depict ideas or actions. Often the pictures are cut from old magazines or newspapers, with glue sticks used to affix them.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Your Life as a Billboard** The good news we affirm can be seen in the good we live. Have a volunteer read aloud the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Consider the question raised in the excerpt: Can anyone tell, by observing our lives, that we bear the mark of Christ and are living as his disciples? Talk about the implications of that question: for what others see us doing as individuals; for what others see as occupying the time and resources of your congregation. Ask: If we take this question seriously, what kinds of changes might be in order? Identify ways those changes might be initiated.
- 2. What Then Shall We Do?** John’s call summons a new vision for life and community. Review the calls to action that John confronts his audience with. Create a collage portraying actions that you believe John would call forth in your day and community. As you create the collage, discuss how you might share it with the congregation and those work groups that deal with evangelism, social justice, and/or community ministry.
- 3. Listening to a Contemporary Call to “Good Fruits”** Contemporary voices raise John’s concerns for ethics and good fruits in our day. Welcome and introduce the speaker to the group. Encourage the group to listen for connections between her or his witness to needed actions and John’s message in today’s passage. After questions and comments evoked by the speaker, ask of the group: What then shall we do? Encourage individuals, and the group as a whole, to claim one or more actions arising from the presentation that they can incorporate into their Advent preparation and the “good fruits” John calls forth.

## CLOSING

Gather in a circle around or in front of the Advent wreath. Encourage adults to call out something they will do this week as a result of this session.

Affirm that it may not be any easier for us to descend into the valley of the Jordan to hear John than for those who first sought him out. Like them, we too might be left wondering, “What then should we do?” Advent asks the same question, as we ponder what our response will be to its hopes and demands. We have John’s answer to that question—and we also have the assurance of God’s guiding and empowering presence on the way.

Offer this benediction from today’s lection from Isaiah that gives voice to that assurance.

*Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the Lord God is my strength and my might.*

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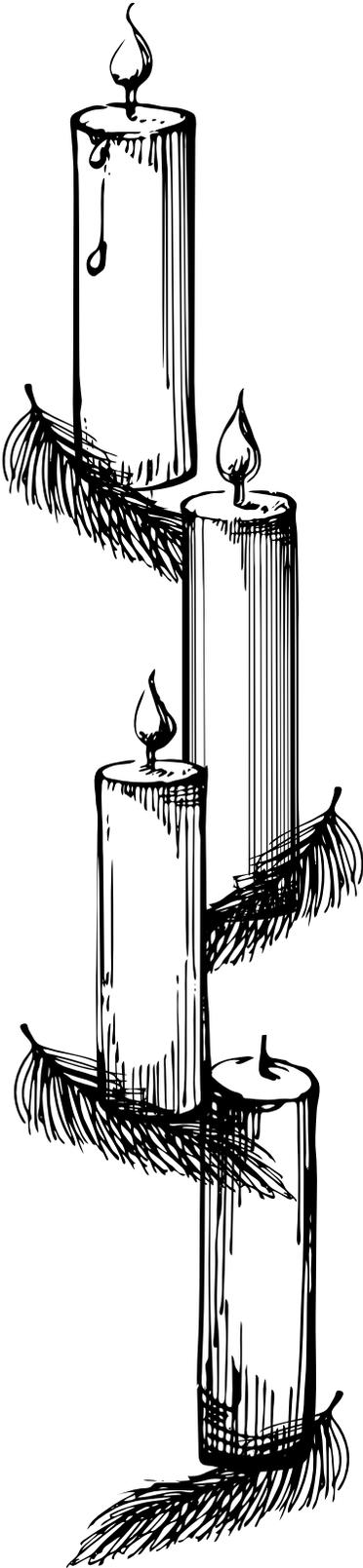
## Messianic Ethics: The Fruits of Living with Hope

John preaches “messianic” ethics, as his calls for actions of repentance are intimately related to his work of preparing the way for God’s Messiah. His hopes directly affected what he called others to do in light of Messiah’s coming.

When his first audience asked “What then should we do?” in terms of the repentance and “good fruits” he summoned, John does not offer stock formulas, generic enough so everyone’s repentance reveals itself the same way. Just as repentance is an intensely personal act, so are its fruits. To commoners who ask the question, he hones in on relationship to neighbor: “*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.*” To tax collectors, John focuses their repentance on their livelihood: “*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.*” That sounds fair, save for the fact that tax collectors only turned a profit by bullying and cajoling and tricking clients into overpaying. To soldiers, repentance is once more laid to vocation: “*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*” Contemporary sources of this era, such as Josephus, recorded the discontent of troops with rations, and urged them against the very activities that John singles out.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, John did not proclaim good news and seek good fruits as a purely spiritual exercise that left one’s weekday life intact. For soldier, tax collector, and commoner, repentance involved fundamental change in how daily life was lived.

Imagine how the lives of each of the three sets of people would have changed if they followed John’s advice.



1. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:85.