Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Bonhoeffer

December 15th **The Shofar** Advent 3

It's easy to become complacent in our religious activity.

While church attendance and participation in other outreach activities are important and can be an expression of our faith, John the Baptist points out that membership in a religious club (or heritage) is not enough. Although it certainly does fit with Luke's interest in redefining the people of God, John's message needs to be heard by baptized Christians as well. An equivalent today would be if a preacher was to say, "Do not presume to say, 'We're baptized!' Show your faith by your actions."

The good news demands biblical justice.

John's message began by demanding that men and women should share with one another. It was a social Gospel which laid it down that God will never absolve the person who is content to have too much while others have too little. John highlights a perspective that sees poverty as a failure of human beings to care for each other more than blame being placed on the poor.

Fidelity does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to do God's will, to be God's people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. Because we believe in the God who is always with us, opportunities for reaching out in love abound. John may have come from the wilderness, but the crowds live in the towns, villages, and marketplace, as we do, and these are places of testing and the arenas in which we offer our fidelity to God through service to neighbor.

For John, and for us, repentance requires us to live out that repentance, to show by the way we live that we are striving in the Spirit to move towards being the people we were created to be and live as God calls us to be living. Repentance here is not just about the interplay between faith and sin; rather, it is about how we are living out the love of our neighbor.

The Messiah will cleanse us by the loving presence of the Holy Spirit.

Being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire (v. 16) sounds a bit ominous. However, God's work of mercy in our transformation means we are cleansed of that which keeps us small and feeling separate from the Father's love and from each other. Remember, fire is a symbol of divine presence, such as the burning bush before Moses (Exodus 3:2) and the pillar of fire leading the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21).

Being scrubbed clean and forced to let go of unhelpful or wrong beliefs about our value and lovability in God's sight can be painful. Repentance requires us to die to preconceived notions about God's expectations and then let ourselves be loved. With that as our baseline, we can properly love others.

Proclaiming the good news includes political considerations.

John proclaimed ***the good news*** to the people. The Greek word used was not a Christian word, and in the cultural context of the Roman Empire, it could include good news that also had a political social aspect to it. While Christians adopted this term to refer to the good news of Christ, the term itself has social and political connotations both in the past and for us today. In conjunction with repentance, being cleansed by the Holy Spirit of our religious complacency and our tendency to neglect social justice, Christ followers need to consider how these values are reflected in our communities — and how we can be messengers of the good news in the communities around our parish venues. We can prayerfully consider how our local leaders reflect the nonviolent care of those groups who are marginalized, following the emphasis Luke portrayed in his Gospel account and the responsibility we have for the other as preached by John the Baptist in this passage.

Jesus alone is our salvation

As we continue our journey through the Advent season, we rejoice that Christmas is not only about Jesus' birth and our sentimental rituals. The stories and scriptures surrounding the birth of Christ are both personal and political, and they provoke the transformation of our minds and hearts as we deepen the understanding of our role as citizens of God's kingdom — God's dream of peace on earth in its fullest reality. Because of that, we can rejoice in the One who comes as our salvation.

He proclaimed a baptism of repentance leading to forgiveness of sins. In today's reading, John spells out what repentance looks like: when peoples' hearts and minds are changed, their actions change too. Words are empty if they do not result in deeds. Fruitless trees will be chopped down and thrown into the fire, a metaphor about failures in living out the faith we profess with our lips.

John's rhetoric is neither polite nor gentle. In Luke (as opposed to Matthew) he does not specifically target the religious leaders. Instead, he calls the whole crowd that has come out to see him "you brood of vipers" and warns them: "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" His message is frighteningly clear. Do not assume that because you have a religious heritage, you belong to God's people. God can create a new people from stones. We let ourselves off the hook too easily if we make this merely a historical remark, a saying that sets the stage for the inclusion of the Gentiles among God's people. Although it certainly does fit with Luke's interest in redefining the people of God, John's message needs to be heard by baptized Christians as well. Show your faith by your actions ***or*** get ready for the axe. The art of compromise was clearly not a part of the arsenal of the prophet. Things for him are very much black or white

God does have expectations

It's notable that John addresses this threat not to individuals, but to the group. The axe imagery prefigures Jesus' parable in Luke 13:6–9 about the unproductive fig tree that is given a good dose of fertilizer and another year to live. But if it does not bear fruit after one more year, then what? The axe. With these stark images both John and Jesus warn God's people against complacency. If the community that identifies itself as God's own people does not bear the fruit that God desires, God is always capable of beginning again with people who are willing to listen and obey.

John's challenge to fruitful living prompts a series of questions from his repentant hearers. "What then shall we do?" The first question comes from the crowd in general, and John replies to the whole group. Do you own two shirts? You have more than you need. Do you have food? Give some away. He leaves no wiggle room for those who might be tempted to say, "But I'm not rich." The command is absolute: some people in your community do not have enough to survive, so if you have anything at all, share it.

God is love and God loves through us

John's words show that he views poverty neither as an accident nor as the fault of the poor. In his time, as in ours, the earth produced more than enough goods to feed and clothe everyone. The problem then and now is that the resources have been grabbed up by a very small percentage of the population. Hunger has been reduced to a matter of economics and political gains.

Economic issues are spiritual issues. If we ignore God's commands to practice social and economic justice, how can we claim that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? If we prioritize our pleasures above our neighbours' necessities, how can we claim to love our neighbours as we love ourselves?

Here we have the initial challenge to all those who seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Followers can only come to Christ and live in the abundance of his loving embrace through their unconditional loving of others. The greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. No exceptions. No excuses. This is why Jesus talks of the way to eternal life being a road that is narrow and winding, one few will follow. This is even more pronounced today where we live in a world that feeds on self-gratification before social responsibilities.