When I was in fourth grade, I failed a test on atoms - protons, neutrons, electrons. I couldn’t even recall what makes up an atom for this sermon so I Googled “fourth grade lesson on atoms” to be able to say the words “protons, neutrons, electrons.” Don’t ask me what they mean. I can’t recall. But what I can remember is that day, when I brought home the test attached to a note I’d written on the bus, a note of apology and of self-confinement, a promise to ground myself for the weekend because of my poor grade. When I think of repentance, I think of this moment because it is precisely not repentance. It was a punishment and the beginning of a pattern: if I did not understand a school subject, I did not ask for help and took the failure instead. It seemed easier that way. And in fact, it was - it is - easier to turn away from the issue at hand rather than turn to it, to face it, to wrestle with it, to repent and change something deep inside.

John the Baptist is not exactly the cheerful character we hope for in this Advent season. We’re pushing ahead towards December 25th, our lists full and our minds racing. Everywhere we look, Christmas is on full display. Pastor Emily Wilmarth reminds me, “Nothing says, ‘Christmas is coming!’ like a tee-totaling wilderness wanderer shouting, ‘You brood of vipers!’” But Wilmarth also reminds me - “we can’t get to Christmas without stopping at John first.”

The Gospel of Luke spends as much time on the birth of John as it does on the birth of Jesus. “Elizabeth and Mary are unlikely mothers; Elizabeth is too old and Mary is too unmarried to bear holy babies. Gabriel visits both Zechariah and Mary with similar messages: don’t be afraid, you will bear a boy who will be great, name him John/name him Jesus.” And next week, we will continue to hear how John and Jesus are linked through Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. “John was born to prepare Jesus’ way, to help usher Jesus into the human world. In the same way, our Advent preparations point to the meaning of Jesus’ birth.”

But - back to the brood of vipers. John is clear - if you want this - this life of baptism - then everything, every little thing, must change. John doesn’t need a half-hearted ritual of obligation, tradition, cultural norm. John doesn’t care if that’s the way your family has always done it. John doesn’t want an inclination or a gesture. John demands what God demands: the fullness there within. All that we are.

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1 Rev. Emily Wilmarth is in my preaching group, By the Vine. She prepared this commentary on Luke 3:7-18 in February 2015. Rev. Wilmarth is the co-pastor of Highlands Presbyterian in Highlands, NC.
2 Wilmarth.
3 Wilmarth.
The Message translates it this way: *Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin.* Baptism, lineage, suggestions of a faithful life are not enough - nothing but a life worthy of repentance will do.

Now, if I were there, on that day, I wonder if I would’ve turned around and gone home. John isn’t inviting, warm, welcoming. But, to the crowd that came to be baptized, he offered a challenge they rose to meet. They wanted to change, to taste that living water and never be thirsty again. They wanted to be reborn, to recognize what they had done with honesty and to hope in God who was making all things new. Like the words of Psalm 42, *deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts.* In John’s thundering proclamation at the water, he is calling for a deep response, calling into the depths of the crowd’s souls. It keeps them there and such calling gives them courage to do what comes next.

One of the pillars of improvisational comedy is the acceptance principle “Yes, and...” It accepts what someone has said and then builds upon that reality with specificity. Now, we know I am not a comedian but - if I were, and I were to say: “Katie, your hair looks gorgeous.” Then Katie would respond, “Why thank you! I knew you were getting new glasses today so I wanted to make sure I stopped by the beauty parlor so you’d be reminded how beautiful I was.” That’s “yes, and.” If Katie were to respond: “Hair? We’re on the phone,” then that would not be a “yes, and.” It seems to me in this scene that - even amidst the brood of vipers business - the crowd that gathered was employing this principle.

The crowds, then the tax collectors, then the soldiers all ask John, “What then should we do?” A “yes” coupled with an “and;” to say “yes” is not enough, an action must follow if that “yes” means anything at all - the crowds want to engage with John, to get the details on this discipleship-kind-of-life. John keeps it simple which isn’t to say it’s easy (repentance never is):

- To the crowds - which is to say all: Those with two coats should share. Same goes for your food. “Do not use your privilege of power against another.”
- To the tax collectors: Don’t take advantage of others, especially you who have wealth. “Do not use your privilege of power against another.”
- To the soldiers: Don’t throw your weight around just because you can. “Do not use your privilege of power against another.”

Do you want to live this life, a life worthy of your baptism?

John - even with his locusts and honey and furry coats - is not as wild as he’s often depicted to be. He’s cunning and wise and observant and cuts to the truth with an urgency of the fully converted. John
does not demand that any of these groups leave their posts, pick up and become a monk, run off and live as a hermit. Stay where you are but be different where you are. Change the system, he says.

Theologian Charles Burns writes, The Jesus that comes to life in Luke’s gospel is one that focuses on “transforming this world into one in which those who have take care for those in need. [The Gospel] serves to remind believers of their obligation to work for social justice here and now. To claim to be children of God without dealing charitably and justly with others is to sin, clearly miss the mark. This is not to imply, however, that to follow Christ means simply caring for others...John the Baptist’s instructions to those who come for baptism make it clear that genuine repentance flows into acts of social justice.”  

True repentance - not punishment, not an act of charity - is to live a life that shares glimpses of Christ’s kingdom breaking in to a world thirsty for change. To not only say “the old life has gone” but to say “yes, and” to how you are living your new life in Christ. To change every day, pivot by pivot, small step by small step. To recognize where you are, who you are, what you have, and use it for those around you.

As we prepare the way that has long been prepared for us, we’re called to remember that this repentance business is a call for the whole body of Christ and indeed, the whole body is needed. It is not without purpose that multiple crowds came that day to be baptized - they weren’t all Presbyterian (in fact, none of them were), they didn’t hold the same power or wealth, they didn’t bear the same religious history. They lived in different parts of town and had different customs. And John said, “I can work with you all.” For this kingdom to break in, this kingdom John was preparing for, he knew that the hands, and feet, and eyes, and heart, and minds of a whole brood of people would be needed.

Can you hear it? Even now, we are asking, What are we to do? We’re not all cut from the same cloth, although we bear many like qualities. Our gifts are numerous and our resources abundant. Our interests and brilliances and histories are complex and point to a breadth of God’s creativity. Yes - and! How can we bear fruit worthy of our repentance?

We’ve already begun. Gifts for the Santa Express were delivered Friday. Children were sponsored for Christmas through our Backpack Buddies program and received numerous gifts. We’ll round up food for Christmas Boxes here on Saturday. Then there’s the labors of love poured out all year - the Sunday School class Pilgrims and Prodigals prepares over 200 grocery bags that we hand out in the church office. Presbyterian Women create emergency food packs of ready-to-eat food for those who need immediate help. The Free Little Pantry and Free Little Library are used every day by neighbors passing through. There’s serving meals at Rebecca’s Cafe, gathering with the Silver Lining Club on Saturdays,

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collecting items for women and children at Safe Haven, the domestic violence shelter. Laundry Love collects quarters and brings laundry supplies to local laundromats. And that’s not even the whole of it.

Like manna from heaven or - like listening to scripture - the Missions Committee has begun a new project: this week, a Donation Center will open at our church, the classroom between the nursery and the elementary classroom that opens to the playground. We will house all the donations we gather for Backpack Buddies, the Free Little Pantry and Free Little Library, Grocery Bags, Laundry Love, and more. And - and - a new ministry, out of John the Baptist’s mouth and into the call of First Presbyterian - we’ll be collecting coats, hats, and gloves for those who go without in this winter season.

Most of us have far more than our share. Our family has 21 coats between the four of us. How many do you have? Or - how many will you have by this time next week?

Yes - we want to follow Jesus. And - and - we know what that means. May it be so in us. Amen.