



*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—<sup>2</sup> during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup> And all people will see God's salvation.'"<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." <sup>10</sup> "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. <sup>11</sup> John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" <sup>13</sup> "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. <sup>14</sup> Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." <sup>15</sup> The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, "I baptize you with<sup>[b]</sup> water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with<sup>[c]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." <sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them. <sup>19</sup> But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup> Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.*

Today there's good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that God has different standards than we do. And the good news is that God has different standards than we do. And we see exactly that happening in the story of Jesus' birth. God is different from what we think! And that's both good and bad for us. It starts with the famous people of that time being listed one after the other. And then they're not mentioned again at all; instead, our attention is focused on one man who, with disheveled hair, a smelly camel hide, and a thunderous sermon, challenges us humans. Yes, that's the bad news. And I can imagine how people would run out of church if the pastor preached today the way John did back then. But the fact that God is different also has a positive side. And this side also pleasantly surprised John. He probably expected a Jesus who would make a grand entrance with a lot of thunder and noise. Yes, someone who would have made an even bigger commotion than John himself, but instead Jesus came and first submitted to the baptism of sinners. And then, according to John's understanding, Jesus was so much against all political upheaval and violence that John himself had doubts and once asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" But the good news

is that God comes differently than we expect. One thing is clear in any case: God completely turns our thoughts, desires, and dreams upside down. And perhaps he has to. He is coming! That is certain. But he is coming differently than we expect. That is why John cries out loudly: Repent! The things that are self-evident and normal to you are no longer normal. Everything is different when God comes. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Prepare the way of the Lord, not so that he would come because of our preparations. No..prepare the way, because he is coming. Yes, and here God is once again a contradiction to our thinking. We think that if God comes, we first have to clean the house, prepare ourselves, be devout Christians, and not sin conspicuously... thinking to ourselves, if we do everything right, God can come. But God is different. We cannot bring about God's coming through our actions. We cannot make God do anything. He comes anyway. But when Jesus comes and brings salvation to us, things can't stay the same as in the past. His presence changes everything. And it changes us in particular. Yes, and that is actually the real reason for his coming. Jesus came to change us. And we can only change when God returns to our lives. The real sins that people commit all stem from this one root: their separation from God. Therefore, when God comes to us, not only our knowledge, nor only our will or our attitudes must change. Our very being must be transformed.

It seems to me that John's contemporaries neither knew nor desired this change of heart. Above all, they didn't want God. In the Jordan meadows many were not so different to our modern Leipzig. We want a cosy Christmas market or other festive Christmas events. A little bit of piety. A little money for the poor, even a little repentance for past sins. There was a lot of goodwill in the Jordan meadows, otherwise they wouldn't have flocked to John. There's also a lot of churchgoing or piety that resembles this. We want a little bit of piety, but not God himself. And none of us expects this pious piety to be met with such a thunderous sermon: "You brood of vipers... Who told you that you could escape the wrath of God?" Yes, that's really the bad news... that God is different from how we've fashioned him out to be. He is more dangerous than we think. The danger that John exposes here is this: through our piety, or even our obligatory acts, we can do the exact opposite of what Advent is meant to do. Advent means that God makes his home among us. And through our piety, we want to keep precisely this God at a distance. It's like saying, "I've done my duty...now God must be satisfied with me and leave me in peace to do my own thing." John's contemporaries said, "We are Abraham's children." That should be enough, God should be satisfied with that. But they had a different understanding of God than what he really is. And that's why John has to continue. It's possible that we humans can twist even the best things into something negative. Just as the Israelites said, "We are Abraham's children," we today can say, "I go to communion and I'm baptized"...and say such things so that we can continue down the old sinful path. We can, as Martin Luther says, remain in sin on Christ's chalk. John the Baptist's sermon plunges right into this dilemma, addressing our will. He speaks into a situation where people signal their willingness to repent but still cling to their old ways. And he does so with a stark image: the trunk of the tree is exposed. Only one more blow of the axe is needed to fell it. God expects the fruits of repentance, and if they don't come, it doesn't mean that judgment simply disappears and the axe is put away. No, judgment will come. And that is bad news.

The people in John's time were deeply moved by his words. They wanted to know what they had to do to escape judgment. John's answer is astonishingly simple. And certainly different from what they thought. But it is precisely in this simplicity that the key lies. For

God's will in everyday life is astonishingly simple. John could have presented a profound ethical, social, or political program. One could write thick books on such things. Instead of doing so, he points to the person standing on the other side of the riverbank with only no tunic. "And behold!" says John, "...you have two. Give one to the one who has none!" With the tax collectors and soldiers, it becomes more difficult. They are structurally embedded in sinful professions. There would indeed be something to change there. And interestingly, John does not expect them to change their professions. Not even the soldiers. They work with force. They are not to leave these structures, but to be different within them. So, not boundless violence, but seeking the good in the imperfect situation, even if it might bring personal disadvantages. John proved in his own life that he doesn't offer an easy way out. For he had to pay with his life for denouncing the king's injustice.

There the people stood. They had heard everything and understood. They understood that they were the ones being cut down one by one, like trees. "What should we do...?" they asked despairingly. God's ways with us humans are different, even in judgment, than we think. Thank God, that's how it is! Thank God we don't have to submit to the judgment of men. Nor to the judgment of our own thoughts, but we must submit to God's judgment. God wants to take us firmly by the hand and lead us through his judgment to himself. For only in this way can things work out. When John says, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" it means that a path is being forged in a place where there is difficult passage. A path into the essence of humanity that utterly transforms it. And that is precisely John's sermon: He speaks of great valleys and hills that will be leveled, and even what is crooked will be made straight again. The Greek word for crooked is scoliosis. Today, the word is used in medicine and means a pathological curvature of the spine. John uses precisely this word. What it means is exactly this: The things in our lives that have become crooked and inflexible will be made straight again. The things in my life that have gone awry and that I cannot possibly straighten myself will be straightened again. The guilty conscience and the sins that burden me cause me to curl up inward and eventually perish completely. But God's judgment works precisely on such curvatures! It speaks to my conscience. It frightens me when I see myself before God. But it makes me listen and stand up. And not only can my conscience be cleansed, my whole life is given a new direction.

On the third Sunday of Advent, so close to Christmas, we encounter the rough John. With his harsh sermon, he wants to denounce and straighten out the crooked parts of our lives. But God is different from what we think in two ways. He comes to us with John's thunderous sermon and with the helpless child in the manger. On the one hand, a sermon of judgment; on the other, God, who becomes a helpless child and submits himself to sin in order to save us. Both belong inextricably together: the sermon of judgment and the child in the manger. We must never forget the reason why Jesus came to the manger—it is because we are lost. Yes, even in our best intentions, we remain lost. The child in the manger is a thunderclap into human loss and changes everything. Salvation is promised and given to us in Christ. Jesus comes to us even without our doing. That is the good news. Amen.