

“Happy Advent, Brood of Vipers!”

Sermon: Year C, Advent 3

Texts: Luke 3:7–18, Zephaniah 3:14–20, Philippians 4:4–7

Preached: December 16, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you, you brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? AMEN

OK, I’m guessing if I were to start my sermon each week in that way not many of you would be back after just a few weeks of that greeting. John’s harsh greeting seems a weird juxtaposition with the gospel text’s assertion that crowds were following John the Baptizer, and even weirder when you consider that the writer asserts that John was proclaiming “good news” to the people who came out there into the wilderness to listen to him and to be baptized by him. And it’s more than a little strange, seemingly, that on this Sunday we call “Gaudete”—“Rejoice!”, exclamation mark— when the other scriptures are filled with exhortations to rejoice (actually, filled with *commands* to rejoice) that the gospel reading should be one that seems like the antithesis of what we associate with joy and rejoicing. All this talk of axes felling trees that don’t bear fruit so they can be cast in the fire, and wheat being separated from chaff so the chaff can be burned with unquenchable fire, certainly does not leave me singing “Joy to the World.” So this gospel reading is something of a mystery to me.

And if I’m going into full curmudgeon mode, those other scriptures aren’t going to get off Scot-free, either. What’s up with being *commanded* to rejoice? Maybe I don’t feel like rejoicing! Maybe there are things going on in my life that are not joy-filled. How am I supposed to rejoice when my heart is broken with grief? How am I supposed to sing songs of praise and gladness when I am weary, exhausted, fearful, sick? Get back to me when those things are done, when I’ve moved past them, and then you can tell me to rejoice, right?

So maybe, in a weird way, this curmudgeonly John the Baptizer has a certain appeal just from the fact he seems to be a curmudgeon. There’s been a lot made recently that people in our society are looking for “authenticity” in leaders. We want someone who will “tell it like it is.” Maybe those people in first-century Palestine weren’t really so different. Why would they stream out into the desert beyond the River Jordan to get yelled at by a weird prophet? Maybe they sensed that something was wrong in their lives, that something was missing. Maybe they sensed the disconnect between what religion was telling them and the way they were living their lives. Maybe they knew that some of the things they were doing were wrong, and they wanted to know how to make things right. Maybe they longed for an assurance of God’s love and care, but had no idea how to be assured of that. Maybe they were craving authenticity, craving a voice who wouldn’t tell them that everything about them was fine the way it was. Maybe, just maybe, they were drawn to John because he didn’t sugarcoat it and pretend that everything was alright. Maybe there was something refreshing about someone who told it like it was. “You brood of vipers!” Ouch. But...yeah. Sometimes that’s the way I feel. Tell me more.

Look at the question they ask when John gets done preaching: “What should we do, then?” That’s not a question you ask when you think everything is fine. That’s the question you ask when you’re at the end of your rope, when you realize that things are screwed up and you don’t know how to fix them, when things are coming apart at the seams. It’s a question we ask when we are weary, or disillusioned, or even just plain bored. “What should we do, then?” But it’s also the question you ask when you realize that things don’t have to stay the same way they are right now, when you become aware that there might be a better way, when you experience that sudden flash of hope that things can be different. It’s a question filled with possibility, even if you aren’t entirely convinced that you’ll be able to do what is asked of you, even if the question is asked hesitantly. “What should we do, then?”

I imagine that in asking it, people are afraid of what John’s response might be, worried that what he would ask of them might be so far beyond their reach that they couldn’t possibly perform it. After all, he was a holy man, an ascetic, who had abandoned everything and was living this austere life out in the wilderness, dressed in crude, simple clothing, the clothing of a prophet, and living off a diet of locusts and honey—sort of a vegan monk. He’s a guy living on the margins. What if he tells me that that’s the way for me to get closer to God and to live a worthy life?? Is he going to tell me to abandon my family and then come out to live with him in the desert? I’m not sure I can stomach a locust. Is that what it takes?

Given the way John looks and behaves, that might be a reasonable expectation. Maybe the question, “What should we do, then?” is asked with a certain resigned or even despairing tone, with an assumption that so radical a man is going to tell them that a life of holiness, a good life, requires that kind of radicalism. It’s a demand few of us would be willing to respond to, isn’t it? But John comes back with a radical response, a response so radical that we overlook it: “What should you do? You should go home.”

Yes. Go home. Go home to your families, your friends, your neighbors. Go home to your vocations. Go home to your everyday lives. Stop running away. Stop insisting that God is somehow far removed and distant from the ordinariness of your life. Instead of waiting for a far-off holy someday that may never come, go home and live fully and generously in the life you already live. You don't have to wait. Share what you have, right now. Do simple justice now. Be merciful to others, right now. Live your own life, no matter how ordinary, or routine, or unglamorous it may be. This isn't beyond your capabilities. It's within your grasp to live a holy life that is pleasing to God—within the context of your own very ordinary life.

Do you have two coats? You don't need two. Give one away to someone who needs it. Do you have extra cans of food in the pantry? Why are they sitting there? Stop hoarding stuff and share what you have with someone who's hungry. You're a tax collector? Don't charge people more than they're supposed to pay so you can get rich off of them. Take a reasonable profit. To the mercenary soldiers, the police force, John says, don't use threats and false charges to extort money from people. Be satisfied with the pay you get. You can substitute your own vocation in those slots. Do you think that your religious identity makes you special? Stop depending on your religious identity and practice as though that's what saves you. The point is that a holy life, a life of justice and mercy, doesn't have to wait for a perfect time. A holy life starts now, with simple actions taken in the ordinary steps of your ordinary life. Stop procrastinating! The day of living changed lives is now. It's here.

What John the Baptizer dares to tell people is that holiness is not the rare and unattainable thing we make it out to be. Holiness is as mundane as the most mundane details of our lives, and is woven into the very ordinary fabric of our lives. There is nothing in our daily living that is too mundane or banal for God, there is nothing that is too secular that we should consider it to be outside the range of the holy. If we're looking for salvation, it is already embedded in the lives God has given us to live. There's no wilderness we have to run off to. The kingdom of God is right here, right now, in and among us, in the most grindingly ordinary moments of our days, even in the things we think are outside of God's concern.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that there's work to do, work so ordinary that we may find it disappointing. When you go to your office, as you launch into your everyday tasks, think to yourself, "The kingdom of God is here in my work! What choices can I make that are in keeping with God's values?" As you shop and choose your groceries, think, "The kingdom of God is here in the grocery store! How do I live in the abundance?" As you straighten your closets, think, "The kingdom of God is here. What have I been given that I can share?" As you prepare and sit down to your evening meal, think, "The kingdom of God is here at this table! How do I give thanks and welcome others to my table?" The kingdom of God is found not so much in the grand and glorious, but in the ordinary and mundane. It's a whole new way of looking at the world. It's within your grasp. Your life, your vocation, your family, your everyday context, it is *all* within God's concern. God's Spirit inhabits the most ordinary of your experiences, and you can find holiness in the most ordinary ways.

But what about that whole separating wheat from chaff and burning the chaff in unquenchable fire thing? That's pretty scary stuff. Is John saying that if I screw it up, I'm going to burn in hell? That doesn't sound very encouraging. But I don't think that's the image John is going for. I think we make a mistake when we look and say, "Oh, there are 'wheat' people and 'chaff' people, and 'chaff' people are going to hell." I think what John is trying to say, is that every one of us has both wheat and chaff in our lives. Every one of us has things in our lives that are not worthy, or things that obscure the good wheat that lies within. Christ's desire in winnowing the grain is to help blow off the useless chaff that obscures the good grain that lies hidden within it. As we live our daily lives, God's Spirit works with us, and works on us, to separate out the good wheat that will be planted to bear more fruit, or that will be turned into nourishment. It is the chaff in our lives that will be burned. Remember that last week we said that "repentance" in scripture is not about groveling in guilt. It is about *metanoia*, having a new mind, a new understanding, a new way of looking at the world. Repentance, *metanoia*, the changing of our hearts and minds, is the start of winnowing. The winnowing fork is an instrument of love for us. The winnowing process may be challenging, but it is a sign of God's deep knowledge of the good that God has planted in us, God's vision that there is a fruitful harvest in us. We may be a brood of vipers, but we are also loved beyond measure by the God who sees more in us than we see in ourselves.

And that is where we find joy. There is joy in discovering that God inhabits the ordinary places of our ordinary lives. There is a weird joy in hearing the shocking truth about ourselves. There is joy in discovering that God's Spirit can transform us, that we can experience true repentance, true *metanoia*. There is joy in knowing that we can find holiness right here, right now. Thanks be to God. AMEN