

Vipers r Us ~ Advent 3C

A brood of vipers! Who wants to be called that? Especially when we're all snugly and wassailly, getting ready for Christmas. What is John the Baptist doing, and why are we talking about it now? John was doing some preaching, some prophetic preaching. Because of that, convenience and comfort were not big concerns of his. He was illuminating the present and announcing the future, which is what Advent is all about and always has been: a single star in the night sky announces the light of the world; a little baby in a stable is God's very self, surpassing death; Christ with us and Christ to come.

Like a good preacher, John had practical illustrations from daily life to illustrate the wider story of God's grace, but he was not an easy fellow to enjoy. In the King James: "John was clothed with camel's hair, with a girdle of skins about his loins. And he did eat locusts and wild honey," The outfit doesn't sound too appealing. I wouldn't know how to wrap it. And I'm sure we would run out of honey long before we got through all that many locusts. "He proclaimed, 'There cometh one mightier than I am after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.'" Now here is the exciting part: "I indeed have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

We understand from the girdle of skins and the locusts that John is a wild man. His words must be important enough to have solidified his place in history, because his social skills certainly were not. We can understand from the latchet remark, the thong of the sandals that is, that John considers himself much less important than the one he is announcing. But what about calling everybody vipers, and threatening them with the cutting axe and the winnowing fork? What did it have to do with John's current

situation, as a thoroughly oppressed Israelite under Roman rule? More importantly, what might it have to do with our current situation this Advent, 2018? The pruning axe, the refining fire and the winnowing fork, they are serious warnings. Through the centuries, these words have been used to scare the h-e-double hockey sticks out of people. But often the words have just served to confuse the heck out of us instead: “Woe be unto you!” Woe be unto whom? Non-Christians? Lapsed Christians? Imperfect Christians? Sinners? Woe be unto everybody?

John the prophetic preacher is talking about what God wants to do for us, not to us. John is talking, ok he’s shouting, to a rural people, an agricultural people, farmers, herders, craftspeople, in rural, agricultural language. If you’ve ever grown fruit trees, you know that sometimes you have to prune ~ radically, to keep the trees productive. But the goal is fruit, not cordwood. If you’ve ever burned off a field, you know it’s a dicey business, but it sure helps next year’s yield. If you’ve ever tried to eat a grain of wheat, you know there’s a husk you have to get rid of before you can use the kernel, and the purpose of the winnowing fork, tossing wheat into the breeze over the threshing room floor, the purpose is bread, not chaff. These are not threats, these are vivid images of God’s present and future activity. God will support the human race by demanding that we seek to be our best selves. And God will insist on helping us. Knowing how much we need help ~ we needn’t try to avoid or deny it ~ will help us produce our fruit, refresh our fields, and make our daily bread. God will help us prune ourselves, burn off our deadness, cast our husks to the wind. All we have to do is cooperate. Far from being a threat, this prophecy is what’s good news. As Henri Nouwen observed, the mark of a Christian is to always be looking forward to a new world, to constantly pose critical questions to the society we live in, with a view towards conversion for

ourselves and for the world, to stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying that a new world is yet to come.

God cannot be moved by lip service alone, when transformative action does not accompany our glowing words. God is not interested in what our ancestors did well or poorly. As David Duplessis observes, “God has no grandchildren.” What then must we do? The answer is clear: remember compassion for all who are less fortunate – in whatever ways – than ourselves. Those of us who have more than we need are to provide for those who have less. The businesspeople must think of the common good before their own profit. The police must stop using their power to control, oppress and exploit the poor and needy. This was true then. It is true now. We have not been promised a life free of difficulty, discomfort and sorrow; we have been promised a life in which joy will have the last word. But we are obligated to turn towards this life in our thoughts, our words, and especially in our deeds.

John’s baptism makes us declare our desire and intention: “I want to bear fruit,” “I want to raise food,” “I want to make bread.” But this other baptism will give us the power we need to do these things. Consider John to be a warming fire, encouraging us from outside ourselves, ‘John the heat lamp,’ so to speak. His baptism results in our declaration: “We confess how we have fallen short. We want to try to do better, and stop trying to justify our mistakes.” But this new baptism warms us from within, producing a conviction, a certain knowledge that we really can get up and prune away whatever is dead in us. We can winnow out the insidious bigotries that keep us divided. We can burn away the wretched arrogance that has so many of us demanding our own personal choices while depriving others of theirs. We can do whatever it takes to break the wholesale addiction to violence that is keeping our

people enslaved ~ to the greatest, worst human invention of all, gunpowder.

It is only the Holy Spirit of God, the grace of goodness poured onto and coursing through each of us that works as an antidote to our fears of being less-than, of being deprived, of being insignificant. The Spirit is the only catalyst for the chain reaction we need to change our lives. Otherwise, our fears will propel us to do unto others before they do unto us, in ways that would have obviated our very existence if they had been done unto us, or our parents, or their parents' parents as immigrants, as strangers in this glorious, troubled country of ours.

It's microwave theology: heating us up from the inside out. Of course, cooperating with all that power means doing what is required of us by the Word of God: risky sharing, justice, fairness, compromise, discomfort and suffering. As the psalmist says, "Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord." Do the right thing, and let go of the consequences. How can someone tell that I'm a Christian? Is it by the words I say, or the look on my face? Or is it by the deep heating within me that makes me determined and sometimes even able to love mercy and walk humbly?

Are we vipers? That is one question we each decide for ourselves. Some days, we're slithering around with our squirmy cousins under big flat rocks, saying things like "We must register the ones we fear; get them under control: all Negroes or Germans or Irish or Japs, all Muslims. They're what's wrong with this country." Not far down that road are the destinations Ostracism and Expulsion. Eventually you get to the town of Plain Killing. There are vipers among us, and sitting idly by while they make decisions for us just won't do. When they slither out and start biting; their bites can

kill dreams and relationships, can even take lives, perpetuating the very cycles of violence they promise to break.

But some days, we good snakes mind our business, cruising around through the grass, expanding opportunities for all, caring for the disenfranchised, basking on the tops of rocks when it's sunny, taking care of our serious problems by facing our failures and difficulties with creative determination and broad cooperation. If necessary, by declaring holy war on guns, not people. Do we really think that if guns and ammunition were as hard to come by as the stuff at the DMV, we'd have the same level of violence?

Let's get real. It won't kill us to change, it will save us. All over the world, including here at home, the spread of modernity and the wearing down of tradition have led to a frantic fantasy: to repossess the past. However these acts of reclamation, through ever more severe adherence to texts without context, do not restore what was lost. They create new and warped and horribly dangerous new patterns, that we have to then stop and deal with. God's very self is dying to help us sort out the furious from the formative each day. He's coming again in a week or so to show us the way. She's here with us now, and will see that we succeed, if only we will call upon her name.