

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Third Sunday of Advent - Year C
93rd Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18
12/12/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

7John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” 10And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” 15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” 18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Brood of Vipers

Good morning! Pastor Meredith Williams, a friend and colleague on the western side of the state, shared an image on Instagram this week that sums up our text pretty simply. It had an image of John the Baptist and said at the top “Merry Advent!” and at the bottom “You brood of vipers!” The mix of both the pleasantness of greetings at this time of the year and the accusation of John capture it perfectly. One scholar explains our lesson from the Gospel of Luke as an example of exhortation. *“This is to explain the mix of irony, hyperbole, criticism, warning, self-effacement, direction, and anticipation that appear in this story. This rhetoric feels as untamed as the wilderness prophet who speaks it. It wakes us up, directs us to repentance, and shows us the impossibility of this life so that we know our need for Jesus.”*¹ Whatever it is, it’s certainly not something a modern day preacher could probably get away with!

I guess I get it, John the Baptist has spent his time in the wilderness, he’s a little rough around the edges. Another scholar points out that *“as a prophetic call, the address “you brood of vipers” has no clear parallels in the OT. But the image of malicious evildoers as poisonous snakes is readily intelligible.”*² That is to say, while it’s not something the people of Israel were used to hearing from a prophet, it didn’t take a genius to piece together what John was saying. It’s interesting that John gets so mad at the crowds for doing exactly what he tells them to do. He warns them to make a change in their lives, but then gets mad when they come to him to do just that. It seems that John is angry because he questions their intention. The accusation *“evokes an image of crowds hurrying to be baptized in order to escape judgment. John likens the crowds to snakes slithering in flight, as they might do to escape the danger of a fire.”*³ It’s a message that’s directed at good church-going folk like you and me. John warns the Israelites that they can’t just be comfortable because of the heritage afforded by their

¹ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 68.

² Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 65.

³ Ibid.

ancestors. Likewise, the warning rings true for all of us too. If we're a part of the church out of fear, like a snake fleeing a fire, we're missing the point. If we claim Christianity out of a fear of what happens next, then we have misunderstood what God is doing.

That's why John calls the group to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." He then calls on them to act out the change in their lives. *"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."* ¹²*Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"* ¹³*He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."* ¹⁴*Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?"* He said to them, *"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."* John wants to make it clear that we need to put our money where our mouth is, we need to actually live out the change. It doesn't make a difference if our actions fail to line up with our words.

It's a message we know, it's a message we have heard before. But sometimes we need a little reminder. That's why exhortation works. Wesley D. Avram writes that *"One exhorts others to act out what they already know and affirm, out of the deepest values of the tradition and people that they claim, and that the exhorter claims with them. Exhortation binds exhorter to exhorted, and them together to values they share, in a way that simple command-and-response does not."*⁴ We know the truths that John calls out, we just needed a little reminder.

I think the reason for this is because of the strange duality inside each of us. It's a duality captured perfectly in a popular tattoo image, it's an image that has started to show up in places other than people's skin too, and when we look at it one way, we see the word sinner. But flip the image over, and it says saint.

We are both. That's the strange thing about being Christian, when we take on the identity that God has for us, we admit that we have the capacity for both the wrong and the good. So even when we slither to John for forgiveness, even when we come to God out of fear, we also possess the ability to do wonderful and marvelous things too! To copy John the

⁴ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. P. 68.

Baptist's image, we need to be branches that bear good fruit. Connected to the tree that is Jesus Christ, we are given new life.

That's why in this season of Advent, we hear the prophetic call of John, and the blessing and assurance in Paul's words to the church in Philippi, words that ring true for us now, words of comfort and hope: *"⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."⁵ Amen.*



Saint

⁵ Philippians 4:4-7 NRSV