

Sermon
December 15, 2024

Advent 3C

Luke 3:7-18

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent and, according to your bulletin cover, it is the Sunday of Joy. It's the Sunday of Joy because we pray that God's power will be stirred up and come among us. It's the Sunday of Joy because in Year A we hear the *Magnificat* and celebrate Mary and all mothers. It's the Sunday of Joy because in Year B we hear the restoration of fortunes, that those who go out weeping will come again with joy shouldering their sheaves, and of John the Baptist making straight the way of the Lord. It's the Sunday of Joy because in Year C, this year, we hear John call the crowd a brood of vipers. Wait . . . what? How is being called a brood of vipers joyful?

For that matter, where is the joy in the ax cutting down trees? Or a winnowing fork that brings in the wheat but burns the chaff with unquenchable fire? Where is the joy in that? Where is the good news? What joy is John bringing with his fire and brimstone preaching?

We have this image of John as a wild man. We see him living in the wilderness, clothed with camels hair, a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. He is Charlton Heston screaming, "Repent!" Or maybe he is Robin Williams in *Jumanji* with wild hair and long beard. This wild-man image is reinforced today when John calls the crowd, not just the Pharisees and Sadducees but the whole crowd, a brood of vipers.

Some preachers use this Sunday to berate their congregation. After all, if John can call people a brood of vipers, then I'm in good company. But berating people, while occasionally needed, doesn't always proclaim the good news; and John was all about proclaiming the good news.

So how are these comments from John joyful?

Let's start with, "You brood of vipers!" A brood is a family of offspring. Children in a large family are often referred to as a brood. John wasn't calling the crowd a bunch of vipers, but the offspring of vipers. The insinuation here is that the people were the offspring of corrupt people and systems that could and would poison those people and systems well into the future.

John is calling the people of his day to repent of these systemic sins and return to the Lord.

We see how Jesus deals with systemic sins when he berates the religious leaders for perpetuating systems that took advantage of widows and the poor, when he attacked the lawyers for loading people with heavy burdens to bear but for which they did not lift a finger in relief, and when he overturned the tables in the temple calling it a den of robbers.

Without berating any of us, we can hold the mirror of John up to ourselves and see that we, too, are a brood of vipers. We are the offspring of corrupt systems which relied on stolen land, stolen people, and stolen labor to build this country. We see the corrupt systems of healthcare that put company profits over the well-being of people, and for which we've been trained to see as normal. We see it when people are loaded with heavy burdens that nobody in positions of power are willing to lift a finger to ease, or when the justice system favors a particular race and class, or when financial systems prey upon the poor. John is calling us today to repent of those systemic sins and to find ways to repair the damage done to others and to creation. These are the mountains of last week that need to be leveled.

Last week I talked about raising the valleys and lowering the mountains. This week John arrives to do just that. He is the voice in the wilderness calling people to account by working to raise the valleys and lower the mountains - to level the playing field and proclaim the good news.

The question the crowds ask John, and the question we are likely to ask ourselves is this: "What then should we do?"

His answers to these questions point to the good news that gets lost with his comment about us being a brood of vipers. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not say we have Abraham as our ancestor."

Pay attention. Repentance isn't based on our lineage. Repentance is based on our actions. It's based on turning back to God with all our heart, mind, body, and soul. Do you renounce Satan, the spiritual forces that destroy the work of God, and the evil powers of the world, turning to Jesus Christ?

What does it look like when we do this? It looks like giving from our abundance to those in need. Do you have two coats? Share with those who have none. How many coats do we really need? Go, look in your closet and give what you don't need, or what you think you might need "someday," to those who actually need it today.

Can you afford extra food? Purchase some for those in need. We have two baskets in the narthex to collect food and supplies for the Pantry. What is to prevent us from filling them every Sunday? Or what is to prevent us from transforming more of Jubilee Hall into a place of free children's clothes or school supplies?

If you run a business, don't participate in wage theft. Pay men and women at the same rate. Don't charge exorbitant interest rates. If you're a landlord, find ways to return security deposits rather than looking for ways to keep them. The list of how we can treat people fairly and justly is endless.

Finally, note what John says about the coming of the Messiah: "He will gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Contrary to popular opinion, and to televangelist preachers everywhere, this isn't condemning some people to the fires of hell, but is a recognition that we are all wheat which has the potential to produce good fruit for the kingdom. It's a recognition that we all have protective layers around us, walls we put up, chaff that surrounds our seed, in an effort to protect ourselves from the harshness of the world around us. Those walls, those layers, that chaff, will be burned away, leaving the wheat to be gathered into the kingdom.

This is all good news because it goes back to the old adage that it is better to give than to receive. We give of our abundance so that others may have enough. We give of ourselves so that others may receive dignity. This is the leveling that John, Isaiah, and God himself are proclaiming. This is the change we are called to do to help manifest God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We may be a brood of vipers, but the good news is that we don't have to become vipers. The good news is that those past sins do not have to dictate our future. John is calling us to pay attention to the sins of our past, to those systems and actions which have the potential to poison systems and people well into the future, and to make changes. He is calling us to repent of those past sins, whether committed by us or by our ancestors, and to turn and follow the Lord. This is the good news - that there is still time to repent and change how things are done.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. Today is the Sunday of Joy. Today is joyful because John is pointing us to a new way of being. Today is joyful because John reminds us that giving is better than receiving, that sharing is better than hoarding, that dignity is better than degradation, and that repentance brings us one step closer to the kingdom.

Let us diligently work to repair the damage done by past generations and current evils so as to bring joy to all of God's people not only in the future, but in the here and now.

Amen.