

A Sermon by the Rev. Margery E. Howell  
Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, Virginia Beach, VA

Advent 3, Year C

John 3: 7-18

December 13, 2015

“Joy vs. Vipers and Repentance”

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and we have lit the Pink Candle on the Advent wreath. The burst of pink offers a bit of respite, because Advent is also a dreadful time. By dreadful, I don't mean unpleasant, but I'm thinking about dread.

Advent places expectations before us, expectation of both judgement and delight. But so far the lectionary has given us mostly judgement. Even if you are dragging the crèche down from the attic, we don't get much about the baby Jesus until next week, Advent 4. The first two weeks of Advent we heard two lessons about the end of times. We've heard very little joy and a great deal of dread.

It is something of a relief that the readings for this week interrupt the dread with a cascade of joy. With the readings and the pink candle, our

imagination of the end is expanded to include not just judgement but also delight. No longer are we praying to escape judgement-now we are singing with gladness because, per Zephaniah, “The LORD has taken away the judgements” against us. Now, per Isaiah, we are drawing water from the wells of salvation, trusting God and spurning fear; we are shouting and singing for joy. No longer are we quaking about the Lord’s coming. Rather, per Paul, we are rejoicing in the Lord and practicing gentleness.

The readings produce joy. We begin to rejoice because we are nearing the Nativity, the birth of the child who stitches all of humanity into intimacy with the God of Israel. And we rejoice because we peer through the judgement, we begin to see that it is actually a thing of joy to look toward the end. Rejoice!

And then we come to our Gospel lesson this morning. Despite all the uplifting hymns, Luke is abruptly jarring us away from our joy. There we are, channeling the Philippians, rejoicing always and reveling in the surpassing peace of God, and then John the Baptist shows up and calls us a brood of vipers! The Message Bible calls us snakes!! Rejoice, rejoice-**BUT** then we’re back to God’s wrath, from which, John insists, neither baptism nor kindship with Abraham will protect us.

Of all the characters in our Biblical stories, other than Jesus, I have always wondered what it would be like to sit down with John the

Baptist and interview him. I think what might come out is a good autobiography!

John is a fascinating character. The Gospel of Luke tells us about John's birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth, prestigious Jews who lived in Jerusalem. Zechariah was a high priest in the temple. His son John would have had the best education, a solid religious upbringing, good food and beautiful clothing. John was born into the elite class of Judaism.

But the next time we see John, he is dressed in camel's hair and eating grasshoppers and honey! Obviously, there was some major break between his childhood and adulthood! And he gave up a life of privilege to serve God. For John, proclaiming the good news is about shedding all the social privileges of his world to rightly see and live into the kingdom of God.

John does not seem to be concerned with what anyone thinks of him. He has let it all go. For John, it is not important to please anyone but God. He always tells the truth about what he sees. When people come to him to be baptized, he can tell that they come only for security and not for discipleship. Their cowardice and selfishness make him angry. John is fiery, untamed and insistent in his mission and message.

The interesting thing to me is that John knew the people were only coming to him for baptism without their willingness to repent. They were a people proud of their long religious tradition. They were God's people, and they knew it! Many centuries before, God had established a covenant with Abraham in which he had promised Abraham many offspring. The people now assembled at the Jordan River were those offspring. They were proud of their heritage. They were proud of Jerusalem, their Holy City, and they were proud of their Temple, which was still under construction but shaping up as the most magnificent building in that part of the world.

These proud people had come to hear John the Baptist. John was a maverick preacher who had no church. He had gone into the desert, and the people came by the thousands, to hear him. It is a bit of surprise that the Jewish people came to be baptized by John because baptism was for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. They were not coming to John to get religion. They were already religious. They were not coming to change the direction of their lives. They were coming to get their religion a bit polished. They were not looking for transformation. Many were simply curious. And John was having none of it! John told them to "produce fruits worthy of repentance." Repentance was at the heart of John's preaching; **NOT** their heritage as Abraham's offspring.

Repentance is a word that is easily misunderstood. When we commit a sin, we think we have repented because we feel bad. However, repentance is not a matter of feeling bad. Feeling bad is only the first

stage of repentance. Our repentance isn't complete until it changes our behavior; we must turn our lives around.

So, John the Baptist called the people to repentance. And they asked, "What then must we do?" John told them to share their food and clothing with people in need. John told the tax collectors not to collect more taxes than they should. And John told the soldiers not to extort money or accuse people falsely. The tax collectors and soldiers had been lining their pockets with the people's money, which was wrong!

John told the people to turn around and face the other way. He told them to change the direction of their lives. He told them to act compassionately toward other people in need. He told them to practice honest and fair dealings with other people. He told them to bring their actions into congruence with their beliefs.

These folks who had come for baptism didn't want to turn their lives around. They didn't want to change directions. They just wanted to polish up their religion a little and then go on their way. They knew they already belonged to God. Perhaps this is why John was so hard on them. They wanted to simply to give an inch of their lives, but God wanted them to give their whole being!

And this is the message God wants us to hear and live. Perhaps John wants to give us a warning and a promise this morning. John warns us

that God will not settle for an inch of our lives. God wants all that we have and all that we are. John warns us that we, too, must produce good fruits or we will feel the bite of an ax at our roots. He warns us that God will not allow us to be casual Christians. And he warns us that God “will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

But John also brings us a promise. He promises us that God rewards repentance-those who heed Jesus’ call to change their lives. He promises that Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire-that God will help us remake our lives-that God will fashion us into something entirely new and entirely wonderful. He promises us that Jesus will gather the wheat-his faithful people-into the safety and security and warmth of his barn. He promises us God’s eternal protection.

God promises each of us protection for eternity! Let’s change the direction of our lives beginning today! AMEN