

“Good News for Snakes”

That’s got to be one of the greatest non-sequiturs in the Bible!

Our gospel reading today begins with these words:

*“John 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?”*

and it ends with these: *“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”*

Good news? Well if that’s the good news I’d hate to hear the bad news!

According to the gospels, John is a part of the preparing for Christ’s coming.

Luke begins his gospel with the birth of John before moving onto the birth of Jesus.

Luke begins the story of the ministry of John before moving onto the ministry of Jesus.

And Luke recounts John’s death before recounting the death of Jesus.

And yet, having John as part of our pre-Christmas season in the Church is really uncomfortable.

Yes, we allow John in for a few weeks in Advent, just waiting until we can hurry him off the stage

so we can get to the part that people came to see – that sweet little baby Jesus.

And John is certainly NOT a part of the story told in our cultural celebrations of Christmas.

Those who grew up outside the Church will probably still recognize Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus

along with angels and shepherds and kings

when they appear in nativity scenes or on Christmas cards or in Christmas carols.

But how many non-Christians have ever even heard of John the Baptist?

Probably very few, because let’s face it:

John is an embarrassment; John makes us uncomfortable; John is the kind of guy we just want to disappear.

But despite how we might feel about him, John is clearly God’s messenger

sent to people in John’s time and place – and to people of every time and place since –

to get our minds and hearts and lives ready to receive the Messiah.

Because the fact of the matter is, if it were not for the truth John tells us about ourselves, we would not need a Messiah.

And what is that truth that John speaks? Well there are 5 pieces of bad news that explain to us just why we need Jesus.

Let’s read this gospel together.... *Luke 3:7 “John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him...”*

**The first piece of bad news is found right in that word “crowds”.**

The Greek word for “crowds” here is *“ochlos”* and is not the word Luke uses

to describe the crowds of people who come to learn and follow Jesus.

This is the word that Luke uses to describe the crowds that accompanies Judas, the betrayer.

For all the negative connotations of that word, however, there seems to be an urgency among these people,

a realization that something is wrong with the lives they’re living & a hope that John knows how to make things right.

Perhaps the most helpful way of thinking about this is to recognize that in our hearts we represent both kinds of crowds.

There is the saintly, healthy part of us that wants to learn and follow Jesus

and yet there is also the sinful, unhealthy part of us that betrays and denies and flees from Jesus in countless ways –

ways we often don’t even notice, let alone acknowledge.

And yet it is this sad, sinful, shameful part of us that is the part that needs a Savior.

Let’s continue to read... *Luke 3:7 “John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers!’”*

**The second piece of John’s bad news is that he calls the crowd a “brood of vipers”.**

Again, I think it’s helpful to remember that we are both saint and sinner,

and it’s the sinner part of us that John sees and calls out,

the part of us that listens to the serpent in the Garden tempting us

to believe we are smart enough to make our own decisions without listening to God

and to do what we want instead of what God wants,

the part of us that disobeys and then slithers back into the foliage to hide from God.

And again, it’s that selfish, sinful, stubborn part of us that is the part that needs a Savior.

Let's continue to read...

*Luke 3:7 "John 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? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance."*

**The 3rd piece of John's bad news is that we must repent—not just once, but again & again.**

The word translated "repentance" here is "*metanoia*"

which means so much more than saying we're sorry.

It's not enough to say we're sorry or to confess our sin –

that alone will not get us forgiveness or mercy or grace.

To be set free from sin requires a change of mind and heart and will

that will be obvious in our lives.

It's like a man who hits his wife and then says he is sorry and will never do it again –

until the next time he hits her.

That man cannot be set free and experience forgiveness

until he undergoes a change that results in him never hitting his wife again.

When John says we must bear fruits worthy of repentance

he is saying that our lives must continue to show

that we have not only acknowledged our sin, been sorry for it, and confessed it,  
but that we have committed to living differently.

We continue to read:

*Luke 3:8 "...Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors';  
for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham and Sarah."*

**The fourth piece of John's bad news**

**is that we cannot rely on our membership in a group that see itself as God's chosen.**

In the case of the people to whom John was speaking originally,

they believed that being a Jew,

being a descendent of Abraham and Sarah,

being one of God's chosen people,

gave them immunity from God's punishment

and guaranteed that they would receive God's grace.

But John makes it clear that one cannot claim a right to God's grace

by virtue of membership within the community of God's chosen people –

be that the Jews, or be that we Christians who have been grafted onto that family tree.

We cannot claim that we are righteous before God

simply because we have undergone the rite of baptism

or because we eat and drink bread and wine together

or because we show up for worship

or because we go to Bible study

or because we take food to the hungry.

All of those things may be good, but not one of them saves us –

because none of those things require a change of heart.

None of those things mean that we are in relationship to God –

a relationship in which we continually offer to God the parts of us that are bound to sin

and ask that those parts be set free.

We can't rely on our baptism or our membership in the Church to save us –

but only on our personal relationship with Jesus Christ our Savior.

We continue to read...

*Luke 3:10 "And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?'*

*<sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise'.*

*<sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'*

*<sup>13</sup> He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you'.*

*<sup>14</sup> 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'."*

**The fifth piece of John's bad news is that we are expected to challenge the status quo.**

Let me explain.

When we read those words today we are apt to hear them as a very general urging to be generous, honest, and content.

But what we miss is the very challenging political bite that those words had at the time they were uttered.

You all know how little words take on great political meaning – they become hot-button words used to fan the flames of fear and hate.

Take the words, "right to life".

While someone could theoretically use those words to talk about protecting people from gun violence, in actuality that phrase has become limited to & synonymous with anti-abortion rhetoric.

Both political parties do this. They co-opt words and phrases to advance their agendas.

In addition to the words,

certain actions become acceptable or unacceptable according to the side you are on

John is saying so much more here than meets the eye – or ear.

Challenging people who have 2 coats to give one, isn't asking us to give a coat away – it's asking us to give away half of what we own.

Challenging tax collectors not to collect more than the taxes due would completely change the system.

Just think what would happen if all of the sudden wait staff in restaurants no longer got tips.

Not being able to live on the low hourly wage, they'd probably be forced to leave their jobs and all of the sudden restaurants would be unable to serve their customers.

Challenging the occupying military troops who ruled by fear and oppression to suddenly become "nice" guys, would set the stage for anarchy and rebellion.

While we hear John's words as gentle encourage to be generous, honest, and content, in actual fact, his words were a hard prophetic challenge for people to begin dismantling the oppressive systems

that kept people locked in cycles or never-ending poverty.

It's not enough to simply give a little food and clothing out of our abundance to those in need.

It's not enough to give charity.

It's not enough for to give hungry people fish.

But John's words call us to teach people to fish,

and to dismantle the systems that caused people to be hungry in the first place.

It's not enough to be baptized.

We must live out our baptismal call to work for justice and peace in all the world.

And so John looks at the people and sees a mob of snakes who rely on their lineage and tradition to save them

instead of living a new kind of life focused on changing the world.

And his words confront us with those very parts of our own sinful nature.

**But that's just the bad news. The good news is yet to come.**

We continue to read....

*Luke 3:16 "John answered all of them by saying,*

*'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming....*

*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

*His winnowing fork is in his hand ...*

*<sup>17</sup>to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"*

If you see yourself as wheat, that's good news;

but if there's a chance John or Jesus might see you as chaff, that's certainly NOT good news.

But here's the thing.

It's not that some of you out there are wheat and others are chaff.

The truth is we are all both wheat and chaff, saint and sinner, judged and justified.

The good news is that Christ comes to us every Sunday, every day, every moment,

to pour out upon us the fire of the Spirit,

a fire that will burn away all of the things

that cause us to betray or deny or abandon Jesus,

to burn away all of the things that cause us to trust in ourselves instead of in God,

to burn away all of the things that cause us to assume

that being baptized into the church is enough,

to burn away all of the things that keep us thinking

that we can continue as we are without having to change our hearts,

to burn away all of the things that keep us thinking

that we are not responsible for changing the world.

And when the fire of the Spirit burns away all of those things, all of that chaff,

then we will be free –

free to experience the abundant life that Jesus came to give –

a life full of hope, full of peace, full of love, and full of joy.

May the fire of the Spirit burn in all our hearts this day and always. **Amen**