

Sermon for Sunday, December 16, 2018 Holy Comforter, Richmond "Brood of Vipers"

We're getting closer and closer to Christmas, and this Sunday, traditionally called Rose Sunday or Gaudete Sunday, points in that direction energetically. We can tell from the reading from Zephaniah, the wonderful canticle from Isaiah, and the reading from Philippians. These readings are all about rejoicing, because change is coming. God's people are going to be saved. In each case, the Scripture is directed to desperate people who have been in a difficult situation. And there's all this hope, all this rejoicing, because they think that things are about to change. Gaudete! Gaudete!

Good theology, that, right? Because we know the story of this Advent season. God is about to take on human form to save us. Fabulous! Exciting! The turning of the wheel of human existence to a better situation. ..

...and then we get to this Gospel. What a downer! John the Baptist, in full-on scary prophet mode, stinky and sweaty and reeking of the locusts he's been eating – no wonder he's cranky – yelling at those who showed up for baptism "You brood of vipers!" In Matthew's Gospel, he's directing his wrath at Pharisees and Sadducees who are indulging in a little intel-gathering about this strange guy who baptizes people, but in Luke's version, John yells at everybody.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear 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. Even 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."

Didn't anyone ever tell this guy that you get more bees with honey than with vinegar? Well, maybe he's not feeling the whole metaphor, since honey and insects have been the majority of his diet lately. Maybe it's the urgency: get your act together, people. Something world-shattering is about to happen and you need to clean up your act.

This can't be sugar-coated. It's a straight-up shot of vinegar: repent! Do it now!

So much for the happy-clappy Gaudete Sunday stuff. Luke's John the Baptist is all about preparing people...because you don't get the sweet happy-clappy joy without being ready to receive it as more than just presents under the tree. It's about the opportunity to welcome the greatest of gifts, God with us, Emmanuel. And we cannot understand that gift without repenting of the many ways we have acted that would suggest that we are unworthy of the gift.

It's the whole "coal in the stocking" thing without the elfin charm,

And unlike in Matthew's Gospel, the people in Luke's story, even the tax collectors (!) and the soldiers, respond not once but three times with a key question: "What should we do?"

Notice that they don't deny they've done some bad things. No one is saying they are being falsely accused. No one is saying "we don't belong on the naughty list." They simply say "what should we do?"

John's equally simple in his response. He gives very direct guidance: share what you've got, because there are people who have less than you. Don't rip people off if you're in a position of power over them. Be satisfied with what you have and don't take from others. It's not complicated theology. It doesn't require a divinity degree to figure it out. Do the right thing. Prepare yourselves for the One who is coming by living into generous and honorable relationships with one another.

They hear that. They like what they hear. You can imagine them thinking, "well, I think I can do that!" and then they start to wonder if John is the Messiah, the anointed one, who is coming. And once again, he gives a very clear and unambiguous response, "Nope, not me. There's someone else coming who is infinitely greater than I. He's gathering in those who are living rightly, and the ones who aren't? It's not going to be so good for them."

And then Luke wraps up the story with the sentence "so, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

Well, it strikes me as a little odd, that language of good news. To my 21st century ears, it sounds like he's mostly scaring people into preparing themselves. But perhaps not to the listeners of Luke's time. John's words forbid them to rely on the fact that they are part of God's chosen people – they can't rely on their tradition for special dispensation. They have to work on being faithful and righteous; they cannot take their status for granted.

And that then takes me to a place of wondering about the times that I take MY status as a Christian for granted. Yes, I know that as a follower of Jesus Christ I am forgiven my sins, that I am saved, that by my baptism I was drawn into Jesus' bosom as his child forever. And yet...and yet...

How many times do I fail to work at living faithfully? How many times do I avoid the eyes of the person begging on the street corner? How many times do I manipulate a situation to get what I want? How many times do I say "I'm fine. It's those other people who are unfaithful," all because I don't want to have to engage them across our differences?

It isn't just the Pharisees and Sadducees in this story – Luke's John the Baptist points to the whole crowd. It isn't just the people who believe differently than we do, or who do not believe at all, who are in the wrong. We manage to do it every single day...or at least I do, when I'm feeling a little Grinch-y, when I'm jealous of someone else's success, when I worry about what I want at the expense of someone who needs it more.

But Jesus is coming. I – we ALL – are about to get the best of all possible gifts: God in human form. Are we in a place to be ready for him? The good news is coming, but if we aren't ready to hear the challenge that that good news brings, we are not going to hear the joy of that good news.

So, my fellow vipers, you and I, we have work to do. Joy will come, but we have to be ready. It's time for us to be kind and generous. It's time for us to be happy with what we have. It's time for us to be good fruit, not unripe persimmons, so sour on the tongue. It's time for us to be nourishing wheat, not inedible chaff. As God transforms Godself into human vesture, even a viper can become a vibrant and loving and righteous bearer of sweet and nurturing fruit.

We brood of vipers, we can be a garden of delight, but it takes some work, some repentance. It's time to get ready. We've only got a little while to go.

Amen.