

Rejoice, You Brood of Vipers  
 First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida  
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December 13, 2015

Philippians 4:4-6

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

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. 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> 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.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not to un worthy tie the thong of his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His 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.”

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

**YOU BROOD OF VIPERS!**

Each week I begin my preparation for the sermon by reading the three Scripture lessons assigned for the coming Sunday. One lesson usually comes from the Old Testament, one lesson usually comes from the letters of Paul or the other letters in the New Testament, and one lesson usually comes from one of the gospels.

In the season of Advent we also focus on a theme each Sunday. And this Sunday’s theme is joy. That’s what we sang to begin our service for today. Light the candle of joy today.

And so I expected to find that theme reflected in the Scripture lessons chosen.

The minor prophet, Zephaniah did not disappoint. In that Old Testament lesson I read, “Rejoice and exult with all your heart.” Zephaniah was bring the good news of redemption to a people who languished in exile.

Then I turned to Paul’s letter to the Philippians and once again the words seemed appropriate to our theme. Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!”

With all the bad news in the world, both of these passages seemed like good texts to emphasize. Despite all the evidence to the contrary when the Lord is near there is reason to rejoice.

Heartened by these two messages I flipped to the gospel of Luke, and who did I find?

John the Baptist, and he was not very joyful.

What did he tell the crowd that had gathered to be baptized by him?

“You brood of vipers.  
Who warned you to flee from the wrath that comes?”

Who invited this killjoy to our worship today?

Can you imagine me starting a sermon like John?  
 “You brood of vipers!”

I asked my Bible study this past week what they would do if I started my sermon by saying, “You nest of snakes, do you think that coming to church is going to save you? It’s not!”

One lady said in a matter of fact way, “Well, I think most of the people would leave and not come back!”

I would have to agree with her. We might not always agree, but we have to be a bit more diplomatic.

But, diplomacy was not John’s forte.

### JOHN PREPARES THE WAY

After reading the text from Luke, I was inclined to preach on the text from Philip-  
 pians or even do my first sermon ever from the book of Zephaniah! I’ve had quite  
 enough of John the Baptist thank you very much.

But, then I remembered a commentator saying something like this, “If we are go-  
 ing to see the Christ child, the road always begins in the wilderness with the  
 preaching of John the Baptist.”

Maybe we better listen to John after all.

Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah long ago,  
 so John the Baptist prepares the way for the coming of Jesus into our lives today.  
 John is necessary, and I would contend that John’s message is ... in the end ... also  
 a message of hope and joy.

In Matthew’s gospel it is the religious leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees who  
 are called a brood of vipers. We could accept that.

After all we know the story.  
 We know that these religious leaders are hypocrites.  
 They don’t practice what they preach.  
 They deserve the title, brood of vipers.

In the same way, we wouldn't mind so much today if the title "brood of vipers" was applied to those that we think deserve it. I suspect some of us have some candidates in mind.

How about the members of Isis?

How about that man who shot up the Planned Parenthood clinic or the two extremists who killed people at a Holiday Party in California?

These past few months have given us quite a few examples of people that might fit that title, brood of vipers.

But, this year we're not studying the gospel of Matthew, we're studying the gospel of Luke.

And unfortunately, Luke won't let us make that easy judgment.

In Luke's gospel it's not just the hypocrites and the bad guys who are called a brood of vipers.

Everyone is given that title. In our lesson for today John says to *the crowds that came to be baptized by him*, "You brood of vipers ..."

No one was worthy of the Messiah who was coming.  
All of them were in danger of judgment.

It was time to get right with God.

The Messiah was coming to separate the wheat from the chaff. The Messiah was coming to lay the axe to the trees that did not bear fruit.

And I think that John even included himself in that group that was in peril of judgment. The people wondered if John might be the Messiah.

But, John said that he was not worthy of even untying the thong of the sandal of the One who would come. The coming of the Messiah would be a time of reckoning for everyone.

## REPENTANCE BEGINS AT HOME

So where's the joy in this message?

How can this message possibly be good news?

It is good news because the word of judgment also comes with the possibility of repentance.

According to John, it's not too late to change.

We used to sing, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love."

That's true enough, but I would contend that love begins with repentance. Love begins by recognizing our need to go in another direction.

And heaven knows that's what our world needs now.  
Our world desperately needs to go in a different direction.

And, according to John, that change begins with us.

You see, evil isn't just a problem for those folks "over there" ... those folks that are not like us. Evil is a problem for us as well. And until we honestly include ourselves in the group that is in danger of judgment, we will not see a need to change.

That might be a hard pill to swallow in our culture of self-affirmation.

We are prone to say,  
"Others might be part of that venomous brood, but we are exceptional. We are smart and good and know how to get things done. How can John call us a brood of vipers?"

If that's how we look at this passage, it probably would be better to preach a different sermon from a more inviting passage.

But, if we do see our own need to change, John does have a joyful word of hope. Indeed, the message of John can be the most hopeful and joyful message of all.

John tells us that repentance is possible even for people like us. We don't have to stay the same.  
We can go in a different direction.

That's a reason to rejoice in the Lord always.  
That's a reason to light the candle of joy.

They prepared for the coming of the Messiah with repentance back then. And that's how we prepare for the coming the Messiah now.

LIGHT ONE CANDLE

The crowd wanted to know exactly how they should change. They asked John,

“What should we do?”

And John replied,  
“It’s simple. Have you got two coats?  
Share with someone who has none.

Do you have more than enough food?  
Bring those extra cans to the food pantry.”

Have enough faith to do something.  
The kingdom of God begins with small acts of mercy.  
As the saying goes, instead of cursing the darkness light one candle.

We don’t have to do everything.  
We just have to do something.

## LIGHT FOR SINNERS

When John said this, even the worst sinners saw a glimmer of hope. And so they too came to John.

First, the tax collectors came and asked,  
“What should we do?”

You remember the tax collectors.  
They collected money for the oppressive Roman government.

The people thought that if anyone was going to hell it would be these turncoats working for the Roman IRS. There were two classes of people, sinners who were really bad and tax collectors who were even worse.

But, John thought that there was hope even for the tax collectors. When they came to him asking what they should do he told them,

“Be honest in your work.  
Don’t collect any more taxes than the amount prescribed.”

When John said that, there was a second unpopular group that was emboldened to ask the same question. The soldiers asked, “What should we do?”

And John once again said,

“Be honest in your work.  
Don’t extort money by threats and false accusations.  
Be satisfied with your wages.”

That seems pretty straightforward to me.  
Share what you have, and treat others fairly.

## GENTLENESS

Paul adds something in his letter to the Philippians that I think is also vitally important as we prepare for the coming of Christ. Paul wrote,

“Let your gentleness be known by everyone.  
The Lord is near.”

The word translated gentleness can also be translated forbearance.

Forbearance means to show patience and restraint in our dealings with others. It can also refer to an extension of time for the payment of a debt.

It seems to me that this is another way of saying,

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

A gentle, forbearing spirit comes naturally to the one who continually rejoices in the grace of God.

## ENJOYING THE CURSE

That’s easy to understand, but it’s not easy to do in world filled with violence and uncertainty.

In fact some Christians leaders are taking the opposite approach. Some are even saying that we should arm ourselves in preparation for an apocalyptic battle with the enemy.

And there are many who would eagerly embrace such a message.

The tenor of our times reminds me of an old “Hagar the Horrible” cartoon. In that cartoon, Hagar is addressed by a Monk.

In the first frame, the monk, Bible tucked under his arm, an expression of peace on his face, says to Hagar,

"Remember, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

In the next frame, we see the monk disappearing over the horizon, and we see Hagar, looking out at us - saying -

"But I enjoy cursing the darkness!"

I wonder if our society enjoys cursing the darkness.  
It sure seems that way sometimes.

Political polls are driven more by our anxieties than our aspirations.

But, that's not how John dealt with the uncertainties of his time. He didn't prepare for the coming of the Messiah by cursing the darkness and putting people in a corner.

Instead, he lifted up the possibility of new life.  
John said, "You don't have to be the way you are.  
You can escape the judgment of God. You can change. You can repent."

And in our lesson for today two enemies, tax collectors and soldiers, took him up on the offer.

## GOOD NEWS

That's why we can rejoice in the Lord always.  
The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is not the way of violence and condemnation.  
The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is the way of gentleness and grace.

And that's why our lesson from Luke closes with these words,

"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed good news to the people."

Our world often associates the call to repent with people who are judgmental and rigid.  
But, actually just the opposite is the case.

The possibility of repentance is a message of hope for all people. When the Lord is near, grace abounds, and people are miraculously changed.

Paul wrote that we should prepare for the coming of the Lord by having a spirit of gentleness.

Remember that Paul was by no means a gentle person before he became a Christian.

He was a persecutor of the early Christian church.

He was an enemy.

And yet that was not the end of the story.

On the road to Damascus he met the risen Christ.

And that put him on a different road altogether.

I like to think that by the grace of God the same thing can happen to our enemies.

Those on the road to destruction can be turned around.

We can't make it happen.

But, we can believe that with God all things are possible.

And that conviction calms our fears and gives us a gentle spirit even in the midst of a world that is filled with violence and fear and anger.

#### LOVE THEM AS THEY MAY BECOME

There's a wonderful hymn in our Presbyterian Hymnal entitled, "Help Us Accept Each Other." And one line in that hymn is especially meaningful to me. It goes,

"Teach us to care for people, for all and not just some, to love them as we find them *or as they may become.*" [Italics mine]

Some people are not lovable as we find them.

Some people really are as John would put it, a brood of vipers.

But, suppose we loved them "as they may become"?

Suppose we thought they could change.

Suppose we thought that there was a power let loose in this world that could even save the people responsible for the crucifixion of our Lord?

Well, that is exactly what we believe.

We believe even a brood of vipers can be changed by the grace of God.

Hear the good news.

Rejoice you brood of vipers.

You can change.

The Lord is near.

Amen.