

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Advent 3, 2018

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist bursts onto the scene today, shouting at those who come to him, who come to be baptized by him: “you brood of vipers!” How does that go over in churches today? Can we get by with shouting insults at those who come to our churches to worship? Would visitors return the following Sunday? As an evangelism tool this may not work very well. As a greeting, it may drive people away...unless of course your name is John the Baptist...then it may actually draw people out to hear you!

In one of the last pieces he wrote before his untimely death, Pastor Chip Gunsten, then assistant to the Bishop and a long-time beloved Virginia synod pastor, speculated about John the Baptist’s role in the Advent season: “I have often wondered, given John the baptizer's role in this season of preparation (appearing in 2 of the 4 Advent Gospel Lessons) ... Why isn't John a nativity scene character? ... He is after all quite a character. He is just as important, maybe more so than shepherds and magi who aren't even named.

Can't you just picture this wooden or ceramic figurine of John - dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, with a little grasshopper juice dribbling down his scraggly beard, faced scrunched up with a look of righteous rage. John - shouting out, "You brood of vipers" with a background angelic chorus of

"Silent Night" ... Well I guess that's why John's not a nativity figurine - he just doesn't fit in ..."

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Judgment is coming according to John the Baptist. Much like his prophetic forefathers in the tradition of Ezekiel, he looks at the society around him and sees corruption, mistreatment of the poor, the economically depressed, the outcasts and the outsiders. The society's treatment of the people on the margins was God's litmus test for the people. John is disappointed in what he sees. He asks the people to be prepared for the one who is coming by turning around their lives and living by loving God and neighbor.

But what does this look like? "What then should we do?" Glad you asked, John seems to be saying, because here are some concrete answers for the people. If you have two coats, share one with someone who has none in your local coat drive. If you have food, do the same. We often worry about the details, do those who receive our help deserve it, etc. John says, just give!

Even IRS agents, I mean tax collectors came out to be baptized by John. They too ask, "teacher, what must we do?" John suggests they should collect no more than the amount prescribed to them. Make a fair living, but do not defraud people. Soldiers came as well, and now the crowds are really getting nervous. John tells them, "don't extort money" or defraud people with false accusations or threats. These are things soldiers were

notorious for back then. Be satisfied with what you are paid. All of these practical answers may be summed up – John is telling those who come to him to be decent human beings to one another. In other words, love your neighbour as yourself. Treat others as you want to be treated.

John the Baptist proclaims this good news to the people, yet in the next verse we find out that Herod has John arrested. This good news is too much for some people. Asking the crowds, even the tax collectors and soldiers to treat one another with respect is too much for some people. If everyone treated each other with decency and respect, what would this world come to?

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

How does his good news prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ? Does John’s yelling, finger pointing and practical advice really do the job? As we begin to complete our journey through the end of Advent, how do these things prepare us? How prepared are we for Christmas? Is the tree decorated? The Advent wreath burning with three candles? Is the hearth trimmed? Are the guest lists complete? The party dates confirmed? Have all the gifts been ordered from online retailers so that they arrive on time? Have we become like the majority of Americans who feel good enough about their financial positions this year that we will spend as much or more on Christmas than we did last year? Have the last minute details been listed – have we checked our lists twice? Have we been naughty or nice?

Or perhaps you do not have a type A personality at all and all of these things have yet to be thought about.

Where in all of these things have we taken time to prepare for the one who comes in the name of the Lord? Where have we made room for the baby Jesus in the manger? Where have we gathered to welcome to true guest of this season? How have we made room in our hearts and lives for the one who comes as a helpless infant in a manger?

We should perhaps wonder, what would John the Baptist say to us? How would John react to the ways we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ? Now, before this becomes just another sermon bashing the modern-day celebration of Christmas...we should highlight the fact that we really want to focus our preparations to welcome the baby Jesus in the manger, rather than just focusing on all the other preparations we tend to make. Jesus is coming. The baby in the manger will soon be here. Mary is literally bursting with fear and hope as she prepares to give birth to all that the angel has promised her.

What then does all of this mean? It is vital for us to hear and to proclaim that in the midst of all that is happening, in the midst of all our preparations, in the midst of all that John calls us to be about, God is sending God's only son into the world. God is coming down in the form of a new born child, helpless and innocent as any new born child is. God is coming down because it's the only way God can think of to repair the broken

relationships between God and all of God's creation. This is the good news of the Advent and Christmas Seasons! Advent prepares us for the coming of God. Christmas shows us that God comes down to us as God promises to come. The good news is too good to be true, and yet, the life, death and resurrections of Jesus Christ points to the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

John the Baptist calls to us – wake up, you brood of vipers! Wake up and prepare the way of the Lord! Wake up and act like decent human beings to one another. Wake up and see that God's grace and love are being revealed to us; in spite, to spite, and despite our own unworthiness. God is coming down to us in order to save and redeem us, make us God's own, through the birth of the Messiah, who comes to die that we may have eternal life with him. This is the good news we are trying to be prepared for.

It's tough, because we have a hard time believing that God's love for us could be so great. It's tough, because we have a hard time believing that God would send an infant to earth. We have a hard time believing that God's grace always comes down to and for us. We have a hard time believing it, we act like its not true, and yet, God comes. God comes and we are set free to be the people and children of God who long, who want to welcome the Christ child once again. We long to live, learn, grow, and love God with all our hearts, mind and souls, and we seek to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yes, it all comes down to being decent people to one another because we are loved, saved, forgiven and set free by that little child in a

manger. Because God has set us free, therefore we live as God's people in this world. Thanks be to God!