

You brood of vipers!

Well, that's a greeting that Miss Manners would likely not approve of, yet here we are. In the other Gospel's this greeting is pointed to the religious authorities. But in Luke, it is directed at everyone that has come to be baptized by John. So we have no one to hide behind. The one crying in the wilderness is speaking to us.

I've always jokingly said that I don't care what people call me so long as it isn't defendant. But this is pretty close. After all, calling me a viper fleeing the coming wrath is a pretty strong indictment of my actions. But if I'm honest, it isn't that unfair of an assessment some days.

Why is the crowd there? The people are coming to John for baptism, cleansing. Cleansing from what? Honestly, we don't know. Why are we all here in-person or online? We all have our own reasons and our own needs for coming to God, but John points some things out that we have to consider in our lives.

All too often we, the people of the church, rest on those laurels. We think that because we are "church people" that we do the right things in the eyes of God. Honestly, in the perversion of idolatry that is American Nationalistic Christianity, pastors and preachers across the country seem able to make the Gospel align with their own actions and political views, regardless of what the Words of Christ say.

This is what John is talking about. Advent is a time of preparation to be in the presence of Christ and that makes it a time of change. Yet for centuries we have wanted others to be the ones that change. We want others to become something or someone we can love. Those folks over there need to change. We, the faithful stalwarts of the church want our actions to be seen as righteous even when they are far from it. We are happy to be the presence of Christ in the world so long as we don't have to change anything about what we are doing, how we are behaving, or what we are saying whilst smugly wearing that mantel.

Christ and Christianity is radical. It is a faith based on Community and caring not on individualism and hoarding. It is taking the time to do what it is right rather than doing the most you can get away with.

John calls the people to baptism, but a baptism of repentance and one that leads to people changing their ways that made them soiled. If you have an extra cloak, give it to someone who needs it. Why do you need two when one serves the purpose? John doesn't tell us to check if the recipient is worth the effort. Yes, someone will take advantage of that generosity. But we are a world in community and should act like it. My ability to live a Christ modeled life of servanthood should never be predicated on someone else's ability to do the same directly in return for me. Jesus didn't say I'll climb on this cross for you if you will climb on that one. There's no quid pro quo in our faith, only in our society, and even there is it ethically sketchy if not outright wrong. Do what is right and don't worry about what the other person does.

John beckons to the tax collector to collect only what is owed. You see, if a tax collector could get more out of someone than was owed to the government, they got to keep the extra. John points out that that is wrong, but that's not a condemnation of government and taxation (despite what some folks might like to twist it to). No, that's a condemnation of unethical business practice.

In an online cartoon, a man says to Jesus, "I think I should put a cross or a fish symbol in my business logo." Jesus asks why do that and the man's response is, "So folks will know I'm a Christian business." To

that Jesus responds, "Why don't you just let them figure it out by charging fair prices for quality work and honoring your word."

That's exactly what John is talking about. If we smack a cross or fish on our business but cheat people, do shoddy work, or don't honor our word, we are a brood of vipers! We are hiding behind the cross rather than being transformed by it.

There is a big difference between us today and those folks that have gathered for baptism by John. They came to be cleansed by water. While yes, we too do that. We have more.

John tells them that there is one coming who will baptize them, cleanse them, with the Holy Spirit. There's the difference! We are a post-resurrection and Pentecostal people. We are marked by the waters of our baptism but we are renewed by the cleansing of the Holy Spirit day by day by day.

That is a very different cleansing. That comes from within. It is a cleansing that convicts us, that says you know you've done wrong. You know you aren't treating that person with love and caring and you must act to change.

Last week we heard the first part of this gospel where John called for the valley's to be lifted up, the hills made low, and the crooked made straight. Those aren't earth moving projects, they are soul moving projects. They are a call to examine ourselves and our way of living and treating people to reflect the love that God offers us through Christ. Advent is the time for us to reflect and prepare the way for God in the world by clearing our wants, desires, and words so that God's wishes and words can flow through us.

This is hard. When the rest of the world is wanting things to change to accommodate them, we are trying to change to open a path for God's love to enter in the world. That's truly transformative. It is how it works. But the change comes from within us. The change is the desire to do what is an expression of love and selflessness. It brings a light in to the darkness of the world that cannot be overlooked. It can't be ignored, and it stands out as so extraordinary that people think we are the crazy ones. Like the guy in the desert eating bugs and honey.

John plays the role of everyone's crazy relative that calls it like they see it. We love going to dinner with them to hear what that Aunt or Uncle will say to the other folks, but woe be the times they turn their thoughts and attention to us. This passage in the other Gospels is one of those moments. We love it when John turns on those religious leaders and calls them a brood of vipers, but in the Luke version we hear this year it is us. We are the vipers. The snakes that kill with one bite. Because we are just as human as those religious leaders and we do like to hide behind our Christianity. But our faith is not one to hide behind. It is active and living and requires us to be the same. As we make our way through Advent may each of us challenge ourselves to make a clear path for God's active and living love to flow through us and bring light to a dark world whose mountains and valley's can only be moved with the strongest thing in God's creation, genuine love for our neighbor that reflects the one who loved us even to the point of death on a cross.

Amen.