

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, December 13, 2009  
Rev. Catherine McCollough  
The Joy in God's Justice  
Luke 3:7-18

When considering what my message would be today, this third Sunday in Advent, I looked at the lectionary passages, and the third Sunday advent theme, "joy", and I felt like I had a difficult task ahead of me, but one that intrigued me. I took on the challenge with gusto, and here is my message: "Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers!" There now.... Do I have your attention? Are you newly inspired and uplifted and ready for the coming of the Lord?

I have always been fond of John the Baptist. I've preached a lot of John the Baptist Advent sermons, but they are usually more focused on the "prepare ye the way of the Lord" part of the passage. That part suits itself well to song and triumphant visual imagery, such as my favorite from the early days of my spiritual awakening: the 1970's Godspell movie, with a handsome young hippie, dressed in colorful rags, blowing on a shofar and striding across the Brooklyn Bridge singing "prepare ye the way of the Lord". The brood of vipers stuff always troubled me a bit. It seemed unnecessarily mean. I usually skipped over that part. Don't we all?

But it is a part of the story, part of his overall message of preparation for a new day, a radically new age, a new way of living. It is the first part of a three part message in today's passage. It begins with this warning about the coming judgment. It is followed by a call for ethical reforms, and then, third, an announcement of the coming Messiah. And Advent joy is a part of this!

But first, let's sit with our discomfort, and give the viper part it's due attention. Listen to how it sounds in the Message translation: "When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin." Most of us skip over that snakey stuff quickly because we think it's not about us. In fact, in the other gospels, it is specifically addressed to the Pharisees and Saducees, and we rarely equate our ordinary Christian selves to those arrogant religious bigots. But in Luke, the crowds who eagerly slither down to the waterside to get baptized are all kinds of people, just like you and me. They are indeed, the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham, but John says to them in The Message translation, "Don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father'. Being a child of

Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen.” These people down at the river are a dime a dozen. They are not great people or famous people, in fact, they are mostly the despised people of the community, lower income folk, people who work for the federal government, people whose roles in society give them a bad reputation in a troubled political environment. They are God’s ordinary people, trying to make a living, whatever way they can. John doesn’t really care who they are. According to the Message he says, “God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is *your life*. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

John’s method of address, his flagrant, insulting opening rant is not that unusual for a prophet. He follows in a long tradition of prophets, garnering our attention with a strong worded, serious warning of eschatological judgment. He hits them where it hurts, and he means it! Nobody there is going to get by on simply having the right genetic background or having good temple attendance records. Listen up! This baptism is going to change your life, or else!

But this story takes a very different turn at this point. In the other gospels, the brood of vipers get angry and defensive, or shrink back. But in Luke’s gospel, these folks get interested. They slither a little closer and raise their reptilian heads, and they ask questions. And his answers “filled them with expectation”.

If I had heard John that day, during his brood of vipers rant, my automatic, debilitating guilt response might have gotten activated. I might have prepared to feel bad about how my life was going to have to change so radically I would not know where to begin. I would start comparing myself to the great Christian martyrs, or Mother Theresa, knowing I could never live up to God’s expectation of me. But imagine, instead, that John’s tone of voice changed, as he answered each question, directly and personally. They asked, “what should we do?” and he answered them. David Lose, a preaching professor at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis summarizes the heart of John’s answer this way: share, be fair, and don’t bully. ([workingpreacher.com](http://workingpreacher.com)) After such fire and brimstone in his opening remarks, his prescription for salvation seems almost mundane. It sounds like what we learn in kindergarten, or the children’s message! It is basic Christian ethics. But of course, it is concise and basic, but its implications are so profound. These are things all people can do, in whatever context they find themselves living. But if all of us regular children of Abraham followed these simple rules, how would this world change?

Of course, it is not only interesting, but politically significant, that John addresses these specific folks-- the less than rich, the tax collector, and the soldier. Luke’s overall message is that the gospel is for all people. These particular folks make that clear. These are people who are thought to have little to give, or are accustomed to taking, not giving. Even these people want to be a part of this new

journey. Even these people, maybe especially these people, have a role to play. They're the ones who asked the questions. The good news, the Advent joy is that in God's kingdom, opportunities to serve are unlimited and easy to find! In a world where the authorities are not friendly, to the say the least, but oppressive and degrading and dangerous to the vulnerable multitudes, John is not asking the tax collector to give up his job. He is not asking the soldier to desert. He is asking them to serve their neighbor from where they are, from within the structure. He is giving them the opportunity to repent and be faithful to God where they are. And they hear in his message something powerfully new. The passage notes that they are filled with expectation, not fear, dread or guilt. Expectation sounds like joy!

Well again, the instructions are deceptively simple in scope and effect. To carry them out, even at the level of the most basic, daily person to person encounter, could disrupt an entire culture and political structure. The third part of the passage concerns the true nature of what is to come, the fulfillment of their expectation, a new King for all people. And this King is going to clean house!

I saw a beautiful story recently that kept popping into my mind as I thought about John the Baptist's urgent, but practical demands, and his promise of a house cleaning. The documentary, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell" tells the story of women in Liberia who after ten years of civil war in which people were brutalized in the most horrific ways started a movement that changed that nation's history. The film introduces us to Leyman Gbowee who had what she calls a "crazy dream" in which God was calling the women of the churches in Liberia to unite and declare that they were tired of war and demand peace. She told the women of the church about this dream and how they needed to find a leader to organize the women. When they told her that they thought God was calling her to be the leader, she was sure it was not her because she was not the best church member or a model Christian. She tells how the women reminded her of God picking other questionable characters throughout the Bible to do some great work of God. When she spoke in church of the dream that God had given her, not only did the women of the church respond affirmatively, but also a Muslim woman who happened to be at the service that day went back to her mosque and organized the Muslim women to join with the Christian women in an effort to work for peace.

These ordinary women, mothers and daughters and grandmothers and wives, gathered daily on a roadside where the Presidential motorcade traveled each day from his residence to his office. They sat there in the rain and in the hot sun and watched him drive by many times, their numbers growing by the day. When the women numbered over two thousand sitting on the roadside and praying, the president could no longer ignore them and invited them to the presidential offices. The film has footage of this simple woman Leyman Gbowee confronting the president of her nation and demanding on behalf of the women of Liberia, that the

president work for peace. This president, Charles Taylor, was essentially a dictator who was prone to smile at a person one moment and order their death the next. Speaking before him carried great risk. She stood up and made simple requests, for ethical treatment, for an end to the rape and for access to adequate food. She spoke the truth before power. After the president agreed to peace talks in Ghana, the women followed him there, dancing and singing and chanting, their numbers growing every day, to remind him and the rebels what was at stake. When it seemed that the needs of the nation were being ignored as the talks dragged on and the killing continued, the women surrounded the building where the talks were taking place and declared that they would not allow the men to leave until an agreement was reached. When Leyman Gbowee was threatened with arrest for obstructing justice, she threatened to strip all her clothes off, which reminds me of some of the prophets in the Bible. In African culture, it is considered a curse for a mother to intentionally strip herself of her clothing like that publically. It prompted these warlords who had humiliated many women by much more brutal acts, to suddenly vow to work toward peace. President Charles Taylor was soon sent into exile. Leyman Gbowee and other women were recently given the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award and it is generally acknowledged that the work of these women, who never took up a gun, but who grounded themselves in prayer and resolved to hold their heads up, not only helped to bring peace to Liberia, but also made possible the election of a woman as president.

This beautiful story helped me to tie together the seemingly strange strands of today's Advent theme, judgment and joy. John the Baptist's message needs to be strong. It takes a wordly, selfish, power-hungry, greedy, popular way of life to task! It is a call to life, or death. If anyone chooses baptism, that one chooses to live a new way of life, a visible, tangible, loving, neighborly, concrete, daily act of repentance. Share, be fair, don't bully. These are acts of joy, acts which build instead of break down community. God will bring about justice, in spite of the world's resistance. John makes that clear! In the dancing and the singing of the brave women of Liberia, working together for justice, I saw the great joy that comes with that daily endeavor.

So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the GOOD NEWS to the people. Amen.