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Luke 3:7-18

I think we should all be grateful that seminaries don't hold up John the Baptist as our primary preaching example. Should my sermons all begin, "You brood of vipers!"? I can't even say that in the right tone with a straight face. In our gospel, we hear a string of what sound like harsh criticism. John tells the crowd ways that they are falling short. He calls them to repentance.

It doesn't sound like John ever took a class in marketing, at least not how we think of it today. Yet he successfully invited the crowds around him to think about their faith and way of life differently. He makes it clear that there should be a connection between their faith and how they live. Loving and worshiping God does not only happen on the Sabbath, or at synagogue. Loving and worshiping God impacts all of life. It shapes how people relate to others at their jobs, in their families. It marks how people manage their belongings and their wealth. To be a disciple involves more than thinking beliefs or feeling emotions. It means a changed way of life.

John serves as God's agent, preparing the people for change. Preparing the people for Jesus. Our passage starts with John addressing the crowds as "a brood of

vipers.” He asks, Why are you here? Why do you want this baptism? “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” *(Lk 3:7)* Are you here for superficial reasons – or a real conversion?

John said, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” *(Lk 3:8)* Good trees bear good fruit. The lives of people of faith should bear tangible fruit that demonstrates that faith. It’s just like what Martin Luther says about Christians – that good works should flow naturally from the life of faith. John called the crowds to live in ways that showed their covenant relationship with God. What’s interesting is that John did not say anything about going to synagogue. No word about saying their prayers. He didn’t say that people should read or listen to the scriptures more often.

Everything that John named dealt with how people live “normal” life. It would be after Sunday mornings for us – encompassing the whole rest of the week. To be a faithful worshipper is to live in ways that reflect one’s faith all the time. It is to be a disciple whose actions speak God’s justice and mercy in our world. The crowd must have looked skeptical. For John warned them that they can’t get out of God’s expectations. “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’” *(Lk 3:8)* Don’t claim that your family or religious or cultural background exempts you. God’s expectation of the lives of his people hold, no matter who you are.

The crowd heard, and they asked John a very practical question. “What then should we do?” (*Lk 3:10*) And John answered them, in general ways and in specific ones. It is interesting that John was preaching to a motley crew of people. We don’t hear about him speaking to a narrow Jewish group, like the Pharisees or Sadducees. The crowd included everyone, even the tax collectors and soldiers, who had bad reputations. Everyone hated what they did, which often included dishonesty and coercion.

John did not tell them to leave their sketchy careers behind. Instead, he called them to act as faithful disciples in their vocations. He told everyone in the crowd with two coats to give one away. Everyone was to share their abundance with people in need. Tax collectors and soldiers were to use their positions of power in ways that reflect justice and fairness. They should resist the temptation of greed. Be satisfied with what they have. He corrected flagrant wrongs that they were committing in their lives. John named ways that the crowd’s behavior did not demonstrate their faith in God, their commitment to God’s values or his vision for their lives.

I read one author who said that John’s proclamation is not really a gospel proclamation. From a Lutheran perspective, it sounds more like law than gospel.

Even though our passage ends with “... he proclaimed the good news to the people.” (*Lk 3:18*) It’s hard to hear good news in such a long stream of criticism.

Yet John’s proclamation was good news for the poor. He told those in power to stop taking advantage of the vulnerable. To live as worshipers of the God of Israel is to live the gospel, which Jesus embodied. In chapter 4 of Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry with a quote from the book of Isaiah: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (*Lk 4:18-19*) Like Jesus will, John indeed proclaimed good news for the poor. He taught people what it meant to be faithful with their power and their possessions.

His call to repentance was also good news for those who lived in broken ways. He named for them how they are living contrary to the gospel. He invited them to be released from some of their captivity to sin. Similar to us, the journey began for John’s followers in the waters of baptism. He gave examples of ways that they could participate in bringing God’s kingdom to the world around them.

John the Baptist speaks to us now, alongside the crowds at his time. Through him, God asks us to face the realities of our actions in the world. To confess our sins and repent. To turn around and to embrace a new way.

Through John, God calls us to deepen our lives of faith. Not just by reading the Bible or worshiping or praying, though those are all good things to do. God asks us to consider how small actions in our daily lives may reveal Christ's light to the world. The point isn't to avoid punishment. When John mentions fire, I don't understand that as threats of the fires of hell. It is the sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit. We have been redeemed and freed, so that we are able to live in God's kingdom, to spread God's love every day.

We are a varied group of people, with different gifts and challenges. Only God could invite us each to the growth that we need right now. So we turn our ears to the Spirit, to prayerfully consider what God calls us to do.

Consider how you spend your time: in your job, in your volunteering, in your relationships with family and neighbors. At what moments in your life does God cringe, or mourn, your choices? How can you more clearly reflect God's love for justice? How can you extend God's mercy and love to others?

Consider how you manage your household, your time and your belongings.

We live in an incredibly rich country – and we have a lot, even if we don't consider ourselves "rich". How can you share more of your abundance with those in need? In what ways can you be a better steward of what God has entrusted to you?

John the Baptist's harsh words are getting us ready. Preparing us for the kingdom of God that is coming among us now. May we all respond to the Spirit's invitations.