

December 16, 2018 Third Sunday of Advent  
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Did anyone else have a teacher or someone in their life that seemed so intensely strict at the time...but in retrospect...the only things you remember them saying were actually very basic and valuable instructions for what you ought to do in life?

Mr. Niles was mine. It was sixth grade...but I remember so much about him and that year. He wouldn't tolerate much whining about fairness...because fairness is not a rule the universe follows. "If life was fair, we'd be on a wheel," he would say. He wrote hard tests...and demanded that we learn difficult things. He did not let small errors go by without having us learn from them. He was also still, honestly, kind of mean sometimes in a way I'm not sure I forgive him for.

And I think maybe there were people who felt that way about John the Baptist. He is not pulling punches today...but...honestly...he also isn't telling anyone to do anything except the kinds of things we know are the right things to do. The people ask how they should live better...and he basically says, "Don't steal from people...or use your power to manipulate them. When you have more than you need...look for someone who you can share with, whose needs aren't being met." Take care of each other. Respect each other. That's what John is saying.

He's someone who people wandered out into the wilderness outside of town to hear...and they probably walked away not having been told very many things they didn't know already. Now...the prediction of the Messiah is a whole other part of that. But in terms of teaching them how to live good lives...It's amazing how many of us will pay an expert, buy a book, or go to a lecture to have someone tell us something we already know...but just aren't sure if we really want to admit we know it.

So, yeah...I can identify with the crowd around John. Maybe you can, too. Which is one of the reasons that "brood of vipers" comment falls pretty harshly on my ears. So I hope it's not out of my own defensiveness...but I want to try to reclaim something other than total depravity for these people who've come to hear John speak. I wonder if there's a little bit of preaching to the choir going on, actually...because the fact is that these people are the ones who took the time out of their lives to listen to John. Some of them must have done so at considerable risk. We know that there were tax collectors and soldiers in those crowds. Now John was preaching against the powers that kept those people in a job. I am not sure if I have a good analogy for what this is like in today's terms...but imagine an executive at Goldman Sachs being discovered in a group of people working to dismantle the power of

the big banks. Or...imagine workers trying to organize to form a union in an organization without collective bargaining rights for workers.

Going out to John was a risky move. This particular brood of vipers...well...it seems like it has some pretty brave vipers in it. They felt that there was something deeply wrong with the way their world was shaped...and maybe even with their role in it. And they came out looking for answers...maybe looking for an escape.

Now, where it gets very interesting is that John doesn't offer them an escape, the way other wilderness spiritual communities like the Essenes might have done. They could have invited people to abandon the empire to its evils and come and live away from all that. I wonder if any of those tax collectors or soldiers were hoping for a message like that. Because what they get instead is John telling them to march back into the jaws of the empire and live differently...better...with integrity...for the sake of whatever small measure of building justice might be in their power. And this is God's way, after all. So often, God does not remove us from our challenges...but walks with us more deeply into them...into the work of being present to the world as it is – broken, suffering, and messy.

This is a hard thing to be told...especially on a day and in a season when we are also bombarded with joy and love...and the instruction to “rejoice!” as if that is a light switch we can just flip. Rejoice! Don't worry or be afraid!

Anxiety disorders run in my family. I'm not diagnosed with one...yet...but I expect I will be someday. When I am in an anxiety spiral...one of the least helpful thin I can hear is “Don't worry.” Yeah. Easier said than done, buddy.

Anxiety is not something we can just turn off any more than joy is something we can flip on like a switch. God is not offering us an escape...or an easy fix today. But here is where I think we reach the point that allows us to see John preaching as true good news – as gospel.

We don't get to escape where this world is wrong...AND...we also don't have to live with it alone. In small ways, we will even be called to the work of rebuilding the world as it was intended. In Judaism (especially in North America) there is a phrase for this *tikkun olam* – “to heal the world.” The idea is that the world has been shattered into millions of pieces by evil...but the work of putting it back together belongs to all of us. And every small act of goodness and love...helps to heal the world.

When I am anxious...I do not believe God is calling me to turn it off. But God is offering me a promise...it is the promise we wait for in this season of God's unfolding self-revelation.

When I am anxious...and when I am called back into the difficulty of the world as it is...When I realize that God isn't going to offer me a magical escape...I also realize that God is going to leave me here alone either. So I can say to myself, "Child of God...everything you face today...God will choose to be with you...as close as your breath. You are beloved. You are not alone."

God will not just let us escape our troubles and challenges...but God will also not leave us alone...and there is literally nowhere that God will refuse to go in order to stay with me...no matter how deep the abyss of grief, dread, or isolation...no matter how much we kick and scream and slash at everything and everyone around us...God will never draw a line and say... "I go this far and no further." God is about to show us the fullness of this truth in a poor family, living under the shadow of an empire, looking for shelter along their way.

God enters the mess and never leaves us alone or helpless.

But this time of year it can be hard to find our trust in that...so I hope we can repeat it to ourselves...and offer it to others...and if you need space and time to process where life is hard and too messy...in the middle of a time of year when we feel like we have to be our most put-together selves...then perhaps you might want to join us this Friday at 7 pm for a quite service with prayer, readings, music and candlelight. Our Longest Night service is about this very truth. God is about to arrive in the middle of our lives...and God cares deeply about the burdens we carry...and we will honor them together (and for the sake of each other) on Friday night...as part of the way we keep these holy days, in all their complexity.

May you hear John's words today, and know that they are still true for us now.

Yes, we are probably also a brood of vipers...but we can be brave vipers. And we aren't going to be given an escape from the world today. We are being given a promise that as we live in it, God will be with us. And because of that, we can each do our small work of healing the world. And more and more, we will see the face of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.