

“Are you a Viper? or Rejoice in the Lord”

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Over the past year, I have had the honor of preaching in Presbyterian, Methodist and Lutheran churches as well as Episcopalian. Many of them want a sermon title on Tuesday so they can put it on the board outside the church, which is always a challenge because I rarely start actually writing my sermon before Saturday. I am grateful that we don't ask the title each week, but had Sylvia asked me for a title this Tuesday it would have been either “Are you a viper?” or “Rejoice in the Lord.”

Which sermon would you prefer to hear?

We tend to hear today's Gospel reading as a fire and brimstone sermon from weird John-in-the-desert, not a cause for rejoicing. But perhaps we can look at it differently. The author, Luke, ends this word picture of John's ministry with the statement, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Luke heard what John was saying as good news, a cause for rejoicing.

So let's see if we can get there too. It means coming to the reading with an open mind, letting go of our preconceptions or our emotional reaction to anyone being called ‘brood of vipers’ or more literally, “offspring of vipers”. Interestingly, that's an expression that Jesus also used a couple of times when he was talking about hypocrisy.

John is addressing the crowds who came out from Jerusalem to hear him preach. As an itinerant preacher, he would surely be gratified to get such a big crowd. but he knows that many of them are not there to really listen to his message of repentance. There are two main reasons for that. The first is generational sin - ongoing destructive behavior passed down from generation to generation like the poison of vipers, and the second is the false belief that descendants of Abraham had a privileged relationship with God which meant that they could pretty much do what they wanted.

These are just as true today. Beliefs and hang-ups that come from my family of origin can get in the way of my growing closer to God, and part of the work of the Holy Spirit – the baptism of fire – is removing these blocks. But since God never intrudes on us, God always allows us freewill, we get to cooperate in that process. Removing our inner vipers requires our active participation whether through prayer, meditation or therapy. People who regularly practice Centering Prayer report that it helps them to identify and move through the blocks that prevent them from growing in the Spirit. Whatever path we take, the key is to notice our inner vipers when they become active, to ask for forgiveness and transformation, and actively work to change ourselves and our attitudes.

Resting on our laurels as the children of Abraham may be pride or it may be complacency. Many of us have pride in our Episcopal heritage or pride in being members of this church which has kept going and kept worshipping despite the loss of a settled priest and the loss of many members. Others may reckon that showing up at church and taking part in the vestry of the whole and helping with ECHO and other activities is enough. We don't need to listen to John's message calling us to go deeper, to welcome the Christ into our inner beings in a new way.

John challenges people stuck in both these patterns which prevent the Holy Spirit from working fully, as he says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Note that John doesn't say it is God's wrath that is coming, nor does he say that God is going to cut people down and throw them into the fire.

Trees that don't bear fruit being cut down and made into firewood is good agricultural practice. But the fire may not be the fire of destruction, since the fire of the Holy Spirit purifies and brings us closer to being the Christ-like beings we were intended to be.

After hearing John's challenge, the people respond with one question – what then shall we do? And John gives them four very practical directions: share what you have with those who have less, don't overcharge, don't use your power to oppress others and be satisfied with your wages. Even though tax collectors were reviled and notorious for overcharging, he doesn't tell them to stop being tax collectors. Nor does he tell the soldiers to stop being soldiers. John's directions are quieter but perhaps even more radical. Go on being where you are, where God has put you, but practice justice and love in that place.

Sometimes we wonder what our ministry is, what God is calling us to, what we are meant to be doing. The answer seems to be very simple. Wherever you are, whatever the circumstances of your life today, love God and your neighbor and practice justice whenever you can.

And the Messiah is coming, is already here. As the psalm put it, "Cry aloud, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel."

And that theme is picked up by the brief reading from Philippians today – "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Notice, it doesn't say that God will answer all your requests but rather that the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds as you rejoice in the Lord.

As we surrender to God all the blocks that prevent us being the people God made us to be – as we release our inner vipers to the Holy Spirit, as we let go of our pride and complacency – so we can rejoice in the presence of God in our lives in exactly the circumstances in which we find ourselves, even if they are not what we want them to be. And as we rejoice so the peace of God, the peace which surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and our minds. Whatever is happening politically, whatever aches and pains, whatever tragedies may come our way, joy and peace go hand in hand.

As the prophet Micah put it, what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)