

Third Sunday of Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7; Canticle 9; Luke 3:7-18  
December 13, 2009  
David H. Teschner

John, fresh from his wilderness cave, has obviously forgotten how to be with people. He's never learned proper etiquette – polite conversation. His opening words are loud and offensive. Instead of welcoming people to his revival down by the river, he berates them: “You brood of Vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

In Matthew's gospel, John directs his vitriol only to the Pharisees and Sadducees, whereas in Luke everyone gets a good tongue-lashing. Much like today, vipers were not man's best friend. Remember, it was a snake-like serpent that first beguiled and tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Its punishment was to be cursed above all wild animals to forever wriggle upon its belly and eat dust.

To be called a viper, then, was to be called Satan or tempter or evil doer – the exact opposite of a Son of Abraham. John is making it all too clear that their Jewishness alone will not spare them from judgment. In Bible Study Thursday, someone said John's actions were like boot camp. First they treat you like dirt so you can later be made into an honorable soldier. I recalled joining a fraternity where I had to survive the degradations of Hell Week before I could become a celebrated brother.

John has to deliver the bad news before we can be ready for the good news. “You are reprobates, but there's hope for you nonetheless.” After all, John is from the “Old School.” The prophets from Amos to Malachi always delivered the unpopular, damning message first: “You've messed up, and you're in big trouble with God.” Only later is there some relief and forgiveness and occasionally hope. Our selections from the prophets, Zephaniah and Isaiah, are examples of the latter.

It had been 400 years since a prophet had lambasted the people of Israel. Maybe they were glad for John's scathing censure. It meant God still cared what happened to them. “We'd rather have negative attention than no attention at all,” might have been their attitude. I can even picture them grinning as John rants and raves and thinking to themselves, “Oh boy, just like the good ole days.” When John stops to take a breath, there's a long enough pause for someone to ask, “Okay, then, what should we do? What kind of fruit will suffice to ward off the lumberjacks?”

John's demands are certainly reasonable. To everyone: Share. Make sure everyone has adequate protection from the elements and food for the belly. There is a Haitian proverb with this message: God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but God's not the one to divvy up the loot. We're responsible for equitable distribution. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” When I bought a new winter coat at L.L. Bean in Maine last October, I decided two others in my closet now had to go. I hoped maybe some of you might have bulging closets as well. And you responded generously to the coat drive. Thank you.

To tax collectors who were notorious for overtaxing to line their own pockets, John said in essence to practice fair business ethics. Don't overcharge. Beware of greed. Be healed of your Affluenza -- the sickness which comes from having way too much.

Soldiers also came to be baptized. They would have been Roman gentiles who may have been drawn to the Jewish faith. They were instructed not to abuse their power and position. Don't be bullies for personal gain. Serve in your occupation with honor and integrity. In all three cases, John is expressing God's care and concern for everyone; especially the least among us. In every instance the prophets reminded the people that it was a solemn duty, reiterated again and again in scripture, to make provision for the most vulnerable. Sharing, not over-charging, and respecting are ways we can still give a hand up to those most pressed down by varieties of forces here and abroad.

John doesn't demand that people imitate his radical lifestyle but practice common decency in relation to every human being. John, we might say, represents everyone who tried to teach us and encourage us to be a good person – our parents, teachers, coaches and extended family members. John is calling people back to some basics that every society requires to function – generosity, fairness, honesty and mutual respect – the things we learned in kindergarten.

John's work is ultimately to get us ready for the Messiah – the one whose sandal thongs he claims to be unworthy to untie. A return to a modest ethical standard is preliminary then to an encounter with or recognition of the Christ. If John came from the wilderness, Jesus comes down from heaven. If John offers a symbolic plunge for repentance in the Jordan River, Jesus brings the Holy Spirit and fire to make us new from the inside. If John reminds us to be good and decent, Jesus teaches us to be great and divine. Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The greatest among you shall be servant of all. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If you are angry with your brother, you are liable to judgment. Judge not that you not be judged. Do not be anxious; seek first God's kingdom and store up treasures in heaven. Love one another as I have loved you. Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.

It's hard enough to be a good person all the time. If everyone were just a disciple of John, the world would be a far better place to live. Saul/Paul of Tarsus was a good man. He was law-abiding and practiced his faith with sincerity and integrity. Unfortunately, his devoutness eventually led him to try to eliminate those who began practicing a reform movement within Judaism. His mystical encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus radically changed his life forever. He discovered being good wasn't enough and sometimes even led to unwarranted evil. Whereas Paul may once have been rigid and harsh with himself and others, his newfound faith is characterized by joy. From prison he writes to the followers of Jesus in Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Paul could be joyful in the direst of times. The power of the resurrected Jesus, the Holy Spirit, gave Paul peace deep in his soul and when the outward circumstances of his life were in chaos.

If our peace and joy depend on the circumstances of our lives being arranged perfectly to suit us, then they are from human sources and not the gifts and graces of God. Joy and peace might be indicators to us of whether we are good or great, decent or divine, keeping up appearances or filled, renewed and reborn by the Holy Spirit and fire. Are we John's disciples or have we jumped into hyperspace trying to keep up with Jesus? Amen.