

Advent 3, Luke 3:7-18, John the Baptist, Part 2

The John we hear today isn't quite the same as last Sunday, is he? "You brood of vipers!" isn't as endearing as the promises of the crooked being made straight. The passage for this Sunday has a distinct apocalyptic flavor, especially with the judgment of the ax and the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire. I think I liked last Sunday's John better!

But it might be good to remind ourselves that apocalyptic was in the air during the time of John. Expectations were high for God to act, for God to interrupt time and place, splitting open heaven with power and might and magnificence, ending Roman occupation and the endless and burdening evil and injustice and unjust systems of earth. We don't live in an occupied territory. And, for most of us in this room, the systems in the United States favor us. But even with our privilege, we too long for oppression and injustice and violence to end. Our hearts ache at the fear and violence enveloping the planet. With our first century human siblings, we long for peace to descend.

So the crowds are following John. He's pointing to the fulfillment of the ancient promise. Prepare the way! The Messiah is coming! And crowds of people leave their homes and head out into the wilderness to hear John. To get a firsthand account of what he's preaching and promising.

It's important for us to notice the geography of this story. As we know, the wilderness a prominent piece of this people's history and identity. The wilderness is a geographical location, but it also represents a place on our faith and spiritual journeys—the wilderness (or desert) is an uninhabited place, an unknown place; it's wild and undomesticated. John isn't just in any wilderness: he's in the wilderness around the Jordan River. Many generations ago, after 40 years in the wilderness, the descendents of Abraham and Sarah had to enter into the Jordan River in order to enter into the Promised Land.

Now in this same boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land, John is calling for people to enter into the Jordan to receive the baptism of repentance. But we know, and John makes it clear, that he isn't the one they're waiting for. He's here, in between, asking people to get ready for the arrival of the Promised One.

So this is the setting of this part of Luke's Gospel story. Crowds of people have left their lives, their dwellings, to go into the uninhabited, unknown wilderness. And John greets them with, "You brood of vipers! Who instructed you to escape from the impending wrath? 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 and Sarah."

Now, there's a lot more in these words than a harsh scolding. What John is doing is calling out the bankruptcy of their expectations and worldview. He's criticizing and condemning the systems of thinking that have formed and shaped them. Let me explain. When he calls them a "brood of vipers," the translation could just as well read, "You offspring of vipers." Or, "You fruit of vipers." In other words, they are the products of a cold, slithery, hard-to-see worldview. He follows with the question, Who warned you to escape from the impending wrath? Or, a more literal translation: Who *instructed* you to escape from the impending wrath? It's a rhetorical question. John doesn't want an answer but wants to uncover and reveal the patterns of thinking and living that have gotten them here. He wants to capture the imagination of these crowds who have left their habitations to come into this uninhabited place. And since John is condemning the lineage, or the systemic worldview that is bearing this fruit, he wants them to know why. John isn't enamored with a lineage that traces back to Abraham. That's nothing. That doesn't make them God's brood. "If you want to be offspring of God," John says, if *we* want to be God's offspring, then the

fruits we bear *will* reflect the goodness and beauty of God. Our lives will be characterized by the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness....

John's sharp words are compelling and these crowds of people respond, "What should we do?" They apparently receive his judgment and they agree with it. They're eager for it. The way they've been living and being isn't working anymore and they're ready for something new. They've *already* left the familiarity and certainty of their known worlds and come into this wild and alien wilderness seeking Good News, longing for a life-giving way. So they ask, "Tell us, John, what shall we do to bear fruit worthy of transformation? What fruit is appropriate for this new way of thinking and being?"

I wonder what kind of a response they expected to get. After his fiery judgment, his answer is anticlimactic. "Go home. Go home and inhabit your lives. But instead of being stingy, be generous. Instead of being greedy, do the right thing. And instead of threats and violence, be satisfied with what you have."

This response seems tame following the wild opening words, but we cannot miss how profound it is. My sense is that we human beings often want answers that offer magical or miraculous solutions to our problems. But John isn't doing that. From this barren, uninhabited, unknown place, John is telling them to return to their domestic habitations, to return to the homes and work and communities they know. But instead of behaving like snakes, *be* children of God.

While John targets three groups of people, his message relates to everyone in the crowds, to every income level, every vocation, every interaction and relationship. The first group he addresses is those who have more than enough. To them he says, "Share. *See* each other. Be compassionate, kind, and generous." John says specifically to share bread and coats, material things. But I'm sure in his more detailed instructions he included being

generous in spirit. If our hearts are closed and stingy, we can be giving away food and clothes all day long and still not be bearing the fruits of goodness and kindness, fruits worthy of salvation and transformation.

There were also tax collectors in the crowds who wanted to know what they should do? Here too his answer is so simple we practically miss it. Tax collectors were known for trying to collect as much money as they could, just as our credit card and banking and investment institutions try to collect as much money as they can. Here too John says, “Stop it.” He interrupts business as usual. “It doesn’t matter what is common practice, do the right thing.” And when we are children of God, when we are nourished by the generosity of God’s Spirit, our greediness is transformed into generosity and grace, into joy and kindness. And rather than working for our own good, at the expense of others’ good, we’ll begin working for the good and well-being of all bodies, creation itself.

The third group that John addresses is soldiers. His message is essentially the same: Go home. Keep being a soldier. But stop using your power and position to intimidate or make false accusations or oppress in any way. It doesn’t matter if you’re frustrated or unhappy, stop taking it out on other people. Be satisfied with your wages. John expected that even soldiers could bear the fruits of God’s Spirit.

This third group is probably the hardest for us as Anabaptists to hear. And in the back of my mind I’m thinking, “Jesus wouldn’t have told them to keep soldiering.” But then I recall the story of Cheri Maples. She’s worked in law enforcement for decades (in Madison). At some point in her career, she went to Plum Village, the Thich Nhat Hahn monastery. (Thich Nhat Hahn is a Vietnamese, Buddhist monk, known especially for his work in non-violence, mindfulness, and peacemaking.) A few weeks after her time in the monastery, Cheri Maples was called to a domestic violence scene where a father was refusing

to let his daughter go to her mother's house for a weekend visit. When she arrived, he threatened her. She says that normally she would simply have arrested him. But because her practice in mindfulness was changing her...transforming her...she recognized this man as a human being and started talking with him, asking about what was going on with him. And he started sobbing. She didn't arrest him. And when she ran into him three days later (nice number!), he picked her up in a bear hug and told her that she saved his life that night.¹ Cheri Maples left the monastery and returned to her life, her work, and she produced fruit worthy of her transformation.

Imagine a world where *all people* inhabited their lives bearing the fruits of God's Spirit. Imagine a world where everyone would inhabit their lives knowing they are God's offspring. The crowds of people listening to John could imagine. And they were so moved and inspired by it they were pretty sure John was the Messiah.

I wonder what John would say to us if he spotted us in the crowds of people? My guess is that we wouldn't be singled out but are already included in these three messages. We want the same thing those crowds wanted. Our bodies and beings, deep in our flesh and bones, we want to see and experience God's salvation and healing and liberation not only in our lives, but blanketing the planet. John's words are for us, for us to prepare for all that is unknown and wild in our lives. In the face of all the broken systems of our time; all the unjust and violent and oppressive ways of thinking and functioning; all the worn out, slithery and slippery and unproductive ways our empire shapes and forms our children, I can hear John saying to us, "Go home. Bear fruit worthy of God's offspring."

Bearing the fruit of God's Spirit isn't easy. Bearing fruit worthy of our salvation, our transformation will invariably include the judgment of the ax and winnowing fork. But because we have seen and watched the judgment of Jesus, we know that judgment isn't

punishment. That's what the systems of domination and oppression teach us. But we are being shaped by the Jesus we have seen and heard, and his judgment is about seeing and discerning, and dying and rising. If a tree isn't productive, it's cut down not as punishment but in order for new life to grow. And burning chaff? The chaff is what remains when productive wheat has been harvested. The chaff has done its good work. Burning it is using its stored energy, transforming it into something new. In our lives we will have endless seasons of the ax and winnowing fork, not punishment, but for forming and shaping us into children of God, producing good, beautiful fruit in every season.

One of the many stories that circulated in the media following the Paris bombings was the interview of a father and son. It captured the imagination of many of us who saw it. The child, perhaps three years old, talks about the very bad people who did these things. And then says to his father that they'll have to find a new home. His father responds, "No. There are bad people everywhere. France is our home." As the child struggles to understand, the father points to the wall of flowers that people have brought. The child looks at the flowers, and asks about the candles, thousands of candles that have been lit. And as you watch the exchange, you can see the son's face transform when he gets it. And he says, "The flowers and the candles are to protect us."

There will always be bad people and bad things in our world. But we are being shaped by the God who is made visible in flowers and candles. We are being formed and transformed by the One who comes to us, who is always coming to us, the One who inhabits us. May we live our lives—every piece and part of our lives—bearing the fruit of God's Spirit, fruit that is, indeed, worthy of our salvation.

ⁱ <http://www.mindfulnessandjustice.org/about/cheri-maples/>