

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
Third Sunday of Advent B; 12.15.24; G. Miles Smith+

No one can usher in the Christmas season...quite like...*John the Baptizer!*

Imagine if John had written...our Christmas carols:

- “O come, all ye...*vipers*...joyful and triumphant...”
- “God rest you merry...*vipers*...let nothing you dismay...”
- And who could forget: “We...three...*vipers*...of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar...”

It does seem pretty clear that John’s proclamations *led with*...“you brood of vipers!” His idea of *preparing the way* for God...was to...*metaphorically*...wield an *axe*.

And so, it can sound strange when the Gospel reading said today that...with many such *exhortations*...John proclaimed the good news to the people. *Good* news?! We may well wonder if the “good news” which John proclaimed...was really all that *good*... Or...maybe...*we are missing something here*.

And so, it is *understandable*...that through the history of Christianity...there have been many Christians...whose idea of preaching...and evangelism...has been and still is...to convince us...*just how bad we really are*...in order to be able to recognize and receive...the salvation of Jesus Christ. And that hasn’t always been helpful—in fact it can be off-putting...or worse.

And yet, even the alternative hasn’t always been helpful. I’ll tell you something that many preachers have also learned the hard way: It is actually difficult to preach...“God loves you”...and be heard. Proclaiming that we are God’s *beloved* ...that can be strangely...devoid of power. Is it because we have come to expect that God *should* love us? Or our capacity to believe we are God’s beloved is *obstructed* by our experiences of *suffering*? Or has God’s love come to seem *optional* or even *irrelevant* when there is *an abundance of good and comfortable things* in our lives? Whatever the reason, we may not only be put off by being called *vipers*...but we may even become *numb* to being called God’s *beloved*.

So, whether the prophet...preacher...or Christian lay person...*leads* with “you brood of vipers”...or “you beloved of God”...may actually be something of a *tactical* question...*that can only be discerned in the moment*.

John the Baptizer was truthfully discerning the moment...when he sized up the crowds who sought him out only as...a curiosity...or as some kind of freak show for their entertainment...while they went about doing as they pleased, even at the expense of others. A *brood of vipers*—indeed.

And Jesus was truthfully discerning the moment when he said:

- “*Come to me*, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).
- “Let the children *come to me*, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:13-14).
- But also, lest we forget, even with Jesus, there were other times...when Jesus used the language of “hypocrites!”, “white-washed tombs!”, and even...yes... “you brood of vipers!” (Matthew 23-23-33).

So which is it? Just what *is* the Christian proclamation? Is it that...we are...*beloved*...*except when we are vipers*?

I continue to believe, even when it can be hard to believe, that God always loves us as *the beloved*...even when we can be very *viper*y.

For, if God is not love...then there would be *nothing* at all...and no *glory* seen even within the fallen creation...and no *covenant outreach* of God to the Israel of old...and no “*For God so loved the world* that he gave his only begotten

Son..." Without the unwavering grounding of everything... in *God's love*...there would be no *stirring of the Holy Spirit*...searching the hearts and minds of *all* human beings...throughout every time and place.

Without this profoundly mysterious and persistent *love of God*...for everything and everyone...there would really be no reason at all...*to be urgently...called on...our very capable forms of self-destruction...so that we may be healed.*

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It is *the coming of Christmas*...which should return us to...*first things first.*

It is the coming of Christmas...that invites us to imagine...that it is indeed *God*...who is all *Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*...who shall save the world...*by...truth...goodness...and beauty.*

It is the coming of Christmas...that invites us...*despite our nightmares...or having few dreams at all anymore...to be stirred and awakened...by the God...who is indeed...wonderful.*

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*Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
(O Holy Night)*