

“Removing the poison”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 4:4-7 and Luke 3:7-18

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I love this time of year, don't you? (Well at least I did before I had to grow up and worry about everyone else having a good time.) 'Tis the season for sipping hot chocolate and munching on Santa-shaped cookies, for cozying up with loved ones in front of a fireplace and hanging stockings, for watching colorful lights flicker beneath globs of snow and singing carols, for welcoming the sweet baby Jesus. And in this warm, gentle season enters the uncle no one wants at Christmas dinner: John the Baptist. While the rest of us are wearing festive ties and jingle bell hats, he comes in draped in a ragged coat of camel hair, his beard smeared with the wings of locusts. And then he says it. He says it every year. Every... year: “Happy Advent, you brood of vipers!” Ha.. ha... yes, thank you, uncle, for ruining Christmas yet again.

That's how a part of me feels when I read John's words in Luke today. Where's the joy, the peace, the good news? Where is the gentle lamb, the angel singing high above, the light unbroken? And yet, John believes he has something to say that we need to hear.

John has gone into the wilderness to preach repentance, a change of heart, a new life. He is there to dip people into the waters of the Jordan and raise them up, forgiven and set free, that they might follow Christ and see God. But as he looks out at the crowd, he knows that is not why *they* have come. They are there because they've heard about a new ritual, and they want to check it off their to-do list, so they can go back to their lives unchanged but assured that they have God's protection. It's not faith that has called them; it is a cynical desire to cover all their bases; for them this baptism is nothing more than an insurance policy. They laugh at the madman who actually believes that God is among us.

John looks at the crowd and tells them they are sick. They have been bitten by a viper, and its poison is already coursing through them. Robert Dannals explains that “vipers are poisonous snakes who latch on to whatever they bite and continue to inject venom. They are often small and hard to notice, and in the Middle East they are likely to congregate in the same places where human beings go looking for refuge—a cave out of the sun, the shady side of a rock where you go for a cool respite.”

All these people, John says, were once children looking for refuge and love, and instead—unbeknownst to them—a viper latched on and injected its poison. The hurts, and worries, and evils, of the world coiled around them, and slowly drained them. Where there had once been hope, there was now only cynicism. Where there had once been

charity, there was now only self-protection. People half dead, unable to imagine love, unable to believe, growing up to bite other people and pass on the poison.

We know these vipers, you and I. They are the people who tear us down. They're the abusers who tell us, in word or fist, that we're not good enough. They are the people who resist change, who say, "That won't work; we've never done it that way before." They are the systems of bureaucracy and tedium that rob us of joy. They are the losses that sow seeds of doubt. They are the moral compromises demanded by success and power.

We know these vipers, you and I. Because every day they are threatening to make us like them. And if we are honest, we are like them—at least in part.

And that's the real poison. It's not what they do to us. It's what they take from us. They take the real us, the God-ordained us, the "jump-for-joy-because-I-am-so-loved" us, and make us believe that we are nothing more than what they tell us. That's the poison: they replace our reflection with a lie. A lie that says we are unloveable, says that life is nothing more than a rat race of survival, says that the best we can hope for is a little entertainment at the expense of someone else, says that God is far away.

And maybe that's the first piece of good news—that John, and the gospel, are willing to speak the truth. They name the poison, the sin, the people and things that hurt us. They remind us that life doesn't have to be this way. They tell us that the reflection we have so long accepted is distorted and a lie.

To these, John says to take the ax; burn them away; extract the poison. That's the second piece of good news: we are called to be free of these vipers, to be free of anything that separates us from the love of God and the compassionate, joyful, purposeful following of Christ. Advent is a time for cleaning house—and soul—so that we have room to receive the message of Christ, the message that God is with us.

If these vipers are people in our lives, then Jesus asks us to love them, to pray for them, to be kind to them, to forgive them, to go the extra mile for them, but never once does he tell us to submit to them, to allow them to continue injecting their poison into us. No, he says, Rise and be free of them. Name the poison. Walk away if you have to.

The same is true for the vipers within, to the voices that peddle self-loathing, doubt, and fear. To them, we stand up and say, "No! You lie!"

For, in baptism, in Christ, we are restored to our true selves—not free of struggle or sin, mind you, but empowered to see ourselves as God made us and sees us still. This is critical. It's why the crowd asks, "What then should we do?" What now? Once stripped of the lies, once the poison and all that we thought we were is gone, what will be left?

Whom shall we be? We've stared in that distorted mirror for so long it's hard and scary to imagine anything else.

John says to look anyway. Look and see who you really are. You are the child of God, a son, a daughter of God, made in the image of God, and your actions in life will show it. You will know who you are when you share with others in need; when you are honest and refuse to exploit others; when you love recklessly, trust totally, pray endlessly, cry justice persistently. You will do these things, because you will believe. You will believe that God is as close as the breath in your lungs, as the babe in that manger, as the spark of divine light that is your soul. You will believe that new life is possible, that God's love you, loves everyone, and that love wins—always.

The final piece of good news is that one more powerful than John is coming, one who will baptize us with Spirit and fire. What we cannot do alone, Jesus Christ is coming to do for and with us: to burn away the chaff, to burn away all that stands between us and the acceptance of God's radical love.

When Jesus comes into this world, all its vipers shall swarm and sink their fangs into him, not knowing that when they do, his love—so perfect, so divine—will flow back into them and defeat them. They will throw every lie, every hurt, every evil, at him. They will even take his cousin's life, shutting John up in prison and eventually killing him. They will put this sweet child, this wonderful counselor, this Emmanuel, Jesus, on the cross, and there he will draw out their poison like from a wound.

He will unleash a fire that shall consume every viper. But this fire is not one that destroys evil people and saves good people—as if any such distinction could ever be made. The cleansing fire burns all and saves all, burning away the venom in all. This fire is not condemnation; it is salvation. It comes to restore us to ourselves.

In that spirit, George MacDonald writes, “The wrath will consume what they call themselves; so that the selves God made shall appear.”

And so there it is. Beneath all John's blustering and angry preaching, he speaks a word of promise and love to us this Advent. In Christ, we shall be ourselves once again. All that the world told us we are—bad or lazy, ugly or unwanted—shall burn away. And all that shall remain, on that Christmas morning, is the wondrous child God loves and knows us to be. All that shall remain will be love. **Amen.**