

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent*  
Luke 3:7-18

### **Hope-Filled Living**

John would NEVER have passed the preaching course that I had to take in seminary. Let me try out his technique on you: “YOU BROOD OF VIPERS!”

Now let me say that I don’t think that my preaching professor was motivated solely by concern for his students’ future job security. He taught us to preach Good News, the gospel. He taught us not to stand above the people, wagging our fingers, condemning the sinners below us. He taught us to be creative expositors of the Bible. But mostly he taught us to preach grace, and to do it gracefully. The medium is the message, or at least part of the message, after all. So any would-be prophets at the seminary learned to tone it down. And NEVER (at least if you wanted to pass the course!) to call the people of God names like “you brood of vipers!”

John must truly have been a prophet of God to get away with what he did. For crowds of people came out to the wilderness to hear his preaching and to receive his baptism. Crowds of people came to be frightened into repentance and touched by the Spirit of God. “The day of the Lord is coming” was a theme of the Hebrew prophets. “The Lord is near!” proclaimed John. But is this a message to arouse fear? Or could it be a message of hope?

“The Lord is near” is an Advent message, a message that reminds us of the meaning behind all our Christmas preparations. “Christmas is coming!” shout the children and the marketers and the shopkeepers. “Fa la la la la, la la la lah!” “Christmas is coming! Oh no!” cry many of us in our hearts. “There’s not enough time to get ready, not enough money in the bank to supply all the spending, and I still haven’t lost the extra pounds I gained last year!” Ask most adults today, 12 days before the big event, “Are you ready for Christmas?” and I’ll bet you get more “deer in the headlights” looks than shouts of joy. The Lord is near. How do you respond? With fear? Or hope?

Although John’s message is not one which most of us want to hear in these hectic, joyous, anxious, fun, nerve-wracking, hope-filled days leading up to Christmas, I believe it is essential for those who want to be Christ’s disciples to hear him. His message cuts through the hype and the hurry and it challenges us to pay attention to the incredible heart of the news that Christmas is coming, the Lord is near. John wants us to repent, to look deeply inward, to name the parts of our lives and our souls which aren’t ready to welcome the Christ, which close the door to Christ’s entry. “The ax is laid to the tree” means we’re all on the chopping block—but this is our warning. We have a chance to turn things around. The Lord is near—and so is our redemption.

I suspect that most in the crowd who went to hear John were like most of us today—they would listen to John’s message if it would get them something they wanted. And the something that they wanted was baptism. Some probably thought of it as a kind of insurance policy, that if it really was true that the Lord was near and judgment would soon be upon them, that God would see that they had been washed, that they’d had good intentions, that they had been baptized because they believed. Some people today look at

baptism as an insurance policy, “just in case.” John could see through such shallow motives. Eugene Peterson gives this translation:

“Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin!” (*The Message*, p. 1855)

Our *lives* must change. For the Lord is near.

So what does that mean, John? What are we supposed to do? Should we make sacrifices at the Temple, should we pray five times a day, should we fast and tear our clothes or do penance somehow? What does repentance look like? Three different groups of people ask him, and he gives three answers which are quite specific to the situations of the questioners. Like us, they had probably all heard the same thing in generalities—but he nails them with the specifics. And his answers hit home 2000 years later.

To the crowd who ask the question, “What then should we do?” he answers, if you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. Wow, I have more than two coats—what does this mean to me? Try this: if you have more than you need, don’t think twice about it, find someone who doesn’t have life’s basic necessities, and share. Live generously. The second group asking the same question were tax collectors, and John’s answer to them: no more skimming off the top, no profiteering at the expense of your fellow citizens, even if everyone else does it that way. So what does that mean when it’s addressed to us—be honest, have integrity in all our financial dealings. Don’t take advantage of others just because you can. The third group were Roman soldiers, and John laid it on the line for them: no shakedowns, no blackmail, and be content with your wages. Translated for us—don’t abuse the power which comes with your vocation or place in the world, and live within your means. Being contented with what you have is a sign of trust in God. Isn’t it interesting that all three answers concern our economic lives? John’s concise and specific answer to the question “what then should we do?” to prepare for the coming of the Lord is “Live righteously and ethically, especially in the economic sphere of life.” I wonder if that message was as surprising to the people of the first century as it is to us today.

The Lord is near. Our lives must change. Preparing for Christmas means more than getting the decorations up and the cookies baked and the presents purchased. Preparing for Christ means a serious self-examination and a renewed commitment to a life focused on the love of God and the love and care of neighbor.

After all, what does our baptism mean if those around us cannot see the mark of Christ on us when they observe our lives? What sort of disciples are we? What sort do we want to be?

The Lord is near. The Lord is coming. The Lord is here. Thanks be to God, because it is only by his grace that we can live the holy and righteous life to which he calls us. Even judgmental John, the guy who called people “snakes,” knew that, for when he spoke of Jesus, even he was humbled. When he described the power and holiness of Christ, he knew that while his baptism could touch only the outside, Christ’s baptism cleanses us from within. The Holy Spirit burns away the chaff and prepares us for Christ to dwell within us.

If that isn’t grace, I don’t know what is.

The Lord is near. And because Jesus Christ is full of grace and truth, this is not something to fear, but reason for joy and hope. He calls us to righteous living, and then he graces us with the possibility of really doing it. He challenges us to ethical responsibility and care for others, and then he demonstrates what that looks like. He asks us to change our behavior, and then he changes our hearts, he softens and molds and reshapes our lives to show that we belong to him and to his way. He asks us to follow him and then he makes us his disciples. By the grace and power of his Spirit, Jesus Christ makes us his own.

The Lord is near. Do not be afraid. Live in hope!

Isn't it funny that John, this fiery prophet of judgment, is best known as "the Baptist," or "the Baptizer?" Despite all his scary preaching, he is better known for his actions than for his words. And when we baptize, we call it a "sign and seal of the covenant of *grace*." A gift from God, to mark us as those who belong to Christ, people who are forgiven and free. How can it be that this messenger of judgment has given us such a marvelous symbol of grace?

Yesterday morning in the shower I think I figured it out. It's always my intention to take a brief shower, to conserve water and energy, but it seems that more often than not, I forget my resolve when I start enjoying the wonderful feeling of warm water flowing over me. It feels so good that something has to get through to me to tell me that enough is enough. Yesterday morning I was remembering how on the mission trip to Alaska last summer we enforced water and energy conservation. Twenty-two of us were sharing the two showers of the First Presbyterian Church in Skagway, and that church has enough people passing through who want showers that they have meters on their showers, so for a quarter you can have 2½ minutes of hot water. So we told everyone, youth and adults alike, that a 2-quarter shower was the limit. Five minutes of hot water. That was a learning experience for some. A good discipline. And a lot better than having me or anyone else stand outside with a stopwatch shouting "Time's up! It's time to get out and get to work!"

This is the analogy—John's preaching is the message, "You've been in there long enough! Your time's up! It's time to get to work!" It feels really good to get baptized, but the Christian life begins after we step out of the water and into the world. The Christian life is lived where responsible sharing and hard ethical choices and thoughtful caring for others are our daily responsibilities. It's not enough to get baptized, as if "a little water on our snakeskins" is all that is needed. And it won't do to stay in the shower all day, feeling the blessing of God's grace flowing over us. Our life is in the world, as Christ's life is in the world.

But his grace is not just in the baptism, not just in the church, not just when we're feeling wet and warm and comfortable. His grace is in our daily living, when we make the choice to be generous and honest and just in our relationships with others. His grace is what gives us courage to live in hope when others live in fear. His grace is in the warning message, and in our repentance, and in our newfound ability to live holy and righteous lives. It's all grace.

Offered to a brood of vipers, a bunch of snakes. Who are lifted up by our gracious Lord and given a new life as people of God.

Christmas is coming. The Lord is near. Repent and rejoice!