

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 13, 2015
Third Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalm 85:1-6
Philippians 4:4-9
Luke 3:7-18

Have you ever noticed that people like John the Baptist and the prophets get all of the good lines in the bible? Like when Nathan the prophet confronts King David after his grievous sins and says: “You are the man!”

And here, John the Baptist starts a wing-ding of a sermon by saying: “You brood of vipers! You snakes!”

John and the prophets and their ilk get all of the good lines. But, they also pay for them. In John’s case, shortly after his message he is put in prison, and then has his head chopped off.

And yet, Luke tells us here that John’s message was a message of *Good News*.

It stops you in your tracks and makes you think. Just how is his message *Good News*? How is being called a snake and a viper good news? How is being told that you are poised for judgment good news? How is being told that an unquenchable baptism of fire is good news?

1 If all of this is good news, what must the *bad* news sound like? I'm not sure I want to know. But Luke tells us clearly and unmistakably that John's message here is *Good News*.

 And it's not just *the content* of the message -- it's the bizarre manner in which it is delivered!

 You've got this loud, abrasive, obnoxious guy, dressed like a maniac, creating a really loud intrusion into the scene. John has a "crazy charisma" about him, confronting people with images of an axe at the root of the tree and of unquenchable fire ready to lick up every piece of chaff.

 He's loud. He's unorthodox. He is compelling. And his message is *urgent*. So much so that folks begin to wonder whether *he is actually the Messiah*.

 To which John says: "You think I am a bit extreme? You think I'm a bit "over the top? You think I am actually the One? You ain't seen nothing yet! You have absolutely no idea what you're in for! I'm using water, but when he comes, you're going to experience a baptism of the Holy Spirit and FIRE! You have no idea what awaits you!"

 Every year at this time we have to deal with John, and every year it's the same thing. He makes us uncomfortable. It's hard to relate to him. Hard to identify with him. He looks and sounds a bit too much like a religious fanatic, like he's taken leave of his senses.

John makes me uncomfortable. And so, what do I do? I try to domesticate him. I try to “tame him down” a bit. I try to “rub down” the hard edges. I try to take John and his *really loud intrusion* and I try to turn down the volume so that it’s more pleasing to the ear. I try to make peace with him and his message.

And here is precisely where this text wants to break through to me as Good News. It occurred to me this week that if you live in a world of darkness long enough, you begin to acclimate to it and get used to it. If you live a lie long enough, you begin to make peace with it because it is familiar, it is what you know. You long for the truth because you know it could set you free, but the transformation that the truth brings is fraught with uncertainty and requires great faith. When you make peace with the lie, at least you know what you have.

Could it be that the reason John shouts so loudly at me here is because he wants to warn me not to make peace with the brokenness and sin in my life? Maybe the reason that John seems to “go off the deep end” here is because he knows how easy it can be for me to acclimate myself to the darkness all around me and within me.

And Christ is coming to disturb that. He is bringing with him the fire of God’s love, a fire that will purge and refine and cleanse. In a world filled with voices competing for our attention, *the fact that John loudly intrudes into our quiet*

gathering this morning to remind us not to make peace with what will be consumed by holy fire is a message of Good News indeed.

And there is more Good News in this text. I believe that John's call to repent here is proof that God is gracious and merciful -- that there is forgiveness with Him!

This broken, sinful world is being overturned. God is overturning it by changing people -- changing their hearts and their lives. The fact that we are summoned and invited to repent is a sign of how much God loves us.

It's interesting to me some of the specific folks who are listed here as being part of the large crowds. They include soldiers and tax collectors. These were people who were often complicit in a very oppressive system. They were especially hated. If anyone in the crowd would have had "targets" on their backs, it would have been tax collectors and soldiers.

John says, "you brood of vipers, who warned **you** to flee from the wrath to come?" I wonder if he is looking at these tax collectors and soldiers, as if to say, "How did you get here? How did you get in on this?" It's almost as if John would prefer that they would have stayed behind, so that they could get what they've really got coming to them.

But God is gracious and merciful. The world the way it is shall not always be the way it is. Things are being turned upside down. The world is going to burn,

and the elements are going to melt with fervent heat. But the fire only consumes those who are not prepared. And God in His mercy and love invites all people to prepare. He sends us an over-the-top religious fanatic named John, who says to us: “Don’t get comfortable with the status quo.

Don’t make peace with your sin and brokenness.

Don’t acclimate yourself to the way things are.

Don’t live for yourself, but give your life away for Christ and for others.

John may be a bit loud and obnoxious. A bit unorthodox. But perhaps that only serves to heighten the urgency of his message.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us come with faith, and with gratitude for a God who loves us so much that he would send us a man like John in order to make us ready for a man named Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.