

Prepare!

I don't know about you, but if you're trying to get along with people, calling them a "brood of vipers," is probably not a real good first line. There is something of a paradox in John the Baptist though, for all of his wildness and calling people snakes and all, the crowd still came. In Matthew's Gospel, and in the cases where Jesus uses this phrase, brood of vipers, the people it is directed at are the perpetual enemy of the Gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees. In other words they were people with a theological and political ax to grind. But in Luke, it's just the crowd so let's deal with that, because what John is essentially doing here is lobbing an insult out there, and it's not something he made up, and it's not entirely without rhetorical purpose.

The phrase *gennemata echidnon*, does not just mean a group of snakes, but literally means children of snakes, particularly poisonous ones (vipers). One commentator says the phrase is probably fairly analogous to a certain profane expression still very much in use today, the one that is abbreviated SOB. So, among other reasons that I love John the Baptist there's that, and it's not just to a certain group of people, but everyone who comes out to him seeking truth and Baptism. If I were picking the cast of a movie about this John the Baptist would NEED to be played by Samuel L. Jackson, and this whole monologue would have to be in that irate voice that he has and liberally sprinkled with profanity. No, I'm not going to do that in church, even if I don't have to preach this sermon with kids in the room. My point is, I want you to have that image in your head and ask yourself, would you listen to him?

Did you ever wonder how so many people who actually lived in the same place and heard the actual voices of John and Jesus and saw the miracles firsthand, still didn't believe? You know, I often run into a certain attitude among Christians that the Gospel is just this overwhelming thing that is going to crash into people's lives like the Kool-Aid man and magically make everything great. But the Kingdom often comes in at a strange angle, it often comes through suffering and maybe from the equivalent of a good swift kick. John is doing people a kindness by warning them about what's coming, he is preparing the way with some unpleasant truth.

The fact of the matter is that it wasn't just the "Pharisees and Sadducees" who held this belief that their status as children of Abraham was what made them special. They had some reason to believe that God's faithfulness to that covenant was all they could possibly need, and as I said last week God is faithful to his covenant, but that covenant has a purpose and the purpose is that the children of Abraham would be a blessing to the nations (that means the whole world). Yet as time went by they were becoming more and more insular and self-absorbed, until it seemed like the only thing they could really think about was keeping a hold on what little they had left. Being a righteous people, who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God was off the menu entirely. They were too busy maintaining dead religious rituals that meant very little to anyone. Sound familiar?

It should, it is the fate of every religious institution at some point, and it has been the fate of the Church several times over the course of her history, and it is, I believe, what we are living through right now. I have to admit that, if John were to show up in pretty much any variety of church, including ours, today, he would be calling us children of snakes too. You may be thinking right now, "wow, that's pretty harsh," but look deeper too, let the truth of it sink in, and let it get past your defenses. If you can do that, I promise something really peculiar is going to happen. It's going to feel good, like picking off an old scab. That's the thing that the modern church has lost sight of momentarily: repentance can feel pretty good.

That's why, despite all common sense; angry hellfire and brimstone types of church survive even in this modern world where no one really seems to know what truth is anymore. Because one way to ease the anxiety of the world is to retreat into fear and anger, they are dark caves where we can hide our guilt as God comes walking through the garden in the cool of the evening. But there is another alternative, one that is better and more constructive than retreat, it is called repentance, I know it's an old word, it's a word that might have suffered some damage by being too closely associated with a certain kind of fear and anger mongering. It might be like Leonard Cohen sang: "When they said, 'repent,' I wonder what they meant."

But repentance is good and healthy, and what's more, it can do good things. In many very real ways it can do more good than simply being nice. One of the important, and most difficult, steps in the 12 step recovery process is the step where you "make amends." It's where someone who was an abusive drunk apologizes to the people they hurt. It's where the addict faces the consequences that their addiction had to other people, and in many cases this is where the fruit of repentance shows up. The prospect seems terrifying, and is often one of the steps that people will try and skip over, but it should not be neglected.

To use an agricultural metaphor for the spiritual world, as Jesus often did, repentance is like pulling weeds and tilling the soil, it's the important work that needs to be done. I'm not talking about trying to determine wheat from tares here, this is preparation. This is what advent is about, preparing the way, making the path straight so that all flesh can see the salvation of God. Our witness to the Gospel should not be fearful and angry, and it should not be unexamined and smug either. We should "bear fruits worthy of repentance," that means doing the work on ourselves, removing the logs from our eyes, thinking about our own faults before casting stones. But not just that, using our understanding of falling and breaking to bring the light of the kingdom to others.

This is what mature faith looks like: a person who has been through multiple cycles of realizing what an SOB they had been, and coming to repentance. We don't easily forget those lessons, as painful as they might be, we have them with us always. Mature faith realizes that, while God is ever faithful to the covenant, there is a purpose to it, and that purpose is blessing, it is love and light, and if we don't get with that purpose, God will raise up some stones who will.

So prepare, make the path straight, make the rough places smooth, repent of all the ways you have been children of snakes, and bear fruit worthy of that repentance.