

Welcome! Advent 2  
December 4, 2022

YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! Is a fitting framing for a service built around the concept of Biblical welcome and peace, is it not?

YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! WHO WARNED YOU TO FLEE THE WRATH THAT IS TO COME?

When I checked in with our Bible Study this week, I noted that I was not feeling a lot of energy around John's camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating rants. But listen. They have grown on me. They have grown on me because of what he is going on about.

John, who had leapt in his mother's womb, is in the wilderness prophesying about Jesus. He is quoting Isaiah, as we often do in this place, "The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" He is imploring those who have gathered to do the work of clearing the way for the way of being that Jesus would bring. And he starts yelling when the "Pharisees and Sadducees" show up.

When we see "Pharisees and Sadducees," we can understand that a critique is being leveled against the keepers of tradition. They were not terrible people. I mean, some of them were, but they just firmly represented the religious establishment, the learned protectors of knowledge and rules and the way things must be done. And what John says to them is "Do not presume to say to ourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." John is saying: your value is not in your lineage or who you have been.

Let's sit with that for a minute. To the keepers of tradition and rules, John is saying: your value is not in your lineage or who you have been.

"Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The John offered to us in the gospel of Matthew knows Isaiah well, doesn't he. John is dancing with Isaiah's description of a shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse. Do you remember who Jesse is?

Jesse is King David's father. So this beautiful poem about the predator and their prey, about lions and asps and lambs and babies, about peaceably existing in each other's presence, begins with the imagery of new life springing forth from a tree that has been cut down and thrown into the fire. These passages are talking to each other, and vegetative regeneration is their common language.

This Isaiah passage is pointing to a new and just king. A king who will not rely on frivolous input like hearsay or appearances to make judgements about important things like justice. A king who wears righteousness as closely as he wears his undergarments. Who will be a harbinger of peace. And of course this is often read as describing Jesus. In fact, the Romans passage we have today makes that connection.

So this gospel reading and this Hebrew Bible reading both use vegetative regeneration - new growth - to describe a response to the cutting down of an old tradition and lineage. All is not lost, but all is new. And John uses the language of repentance and baptism. The call is to confess and to bear new fruit that is worthy of repentance. And John offers baptism in water, but describes the baptism that Jesus offers as a baptism with fire. We shouldn't miss the connection, because, in this Matthew passage, baptism as a follower of Jesus is baptism into a burning away of mistaken beliefs about what it is that gives us value.

And this, family of God, this is the scaffolding for reading the Epistle, and thinking about welcome, today.

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God," says the writer, presumably Paul.

This whole passage makes connections between the circumcised - understood to be Jews following religious law - and Gentiles - those who were outside of the past storyline which had been about the people of Israel. It is a plea for harmony, says one of the commentaries. It acknowledges God's promises given in the past, but brings a new set of folks into the story - folks who don't know or follow any of the old rules. Welcome, says Paul, not for the sake of welcome, but for the glory of God. Our right worship of God is bound up in our ability to be flexible and generous where tradition meets up against welcome. But ability and flexibility have to be practiced. Here, as we talk about Biblical welcome, they are, in fact, spiritual practices.

We all have all sorts of mistaken beliefs about our value and our lineage - as individuals and as a community - don't we? It's easy to believe that our value lies in something that has come before. But it's the bearing good fruit to which we are called. We are called into a baptism that burns away whatever does not bear good fruit.

Will you look at your bulletin cover with me? What do you see there that is about welcome? What do you see there that is about peace? Is there anything in this picture that might have to do with remembering the promises God has made? What else do you see in this picture?

Family of God, the welcome to which we are called is a welcome that embraces folks who we might have thought were outside of our story. And we are called to welcome them into a story that is about mercy rather than about tradition. We are called to a welcome that is about peace. We are called to a peace that comes from bearing good fruit. Family of God, we really are called to repent our dead wood, and to do a new thing. Because every single time we welcome something or someone into a relationship, or community, or our story, we are made new. If we aren't, we are not welcoming them.

And so we wonder together - What might this call be for you? What might this call be for us? Will you practice with me so that we might get there?

Benediction today comes from Romans 15:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.