

# WHAT, THEN SHALL WE DO?

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December 16, 2018

Advent 3

[Philippians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 3:7-18](#)

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(prayer)

Last week, I preached about John the Baptist and how all four biblical gospels present him as preparing the way for Jesus with his eccentric teachings out in the Jordan River valley. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all re-purpose Isaiah 40:3 to make this point: *A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'*

My message last week focused on what John might have been like, apart from his roll as the one who helps Jesus begin his own ministry.

John (and Jesus after him) invited people to *repent and believe in the good news* because *the kingdom of God [had] come near*.

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Today's reading from Luke includes some of John's more dramatic preaching: the *brood of vipers* passage. These words are only recorded in Matthew and Luke.

Anyone who has delved into the biblical scholarship around the authorship behind the synoptic gospels might know that when a passage is common to Luke and Matthew (particularly one that is a quotation), it is usually credited to the *so-called* Q Source.

*If you want to know more about Q and the two-source theory of synoptic authorship, I will put a [link](#) in my sermon notes on the church website... or you can just ask me sometime.*

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As Luke uses this Q passage, John insults *all* of the people who are coming for baptism by calling them *brood of vipers*. Matthew is a bit more specific, saying that John focused the insults toward *Pharisees and Sadducees* who coming for baptism.

Calling people "snakes" is an insult that seems to have stood the test of time. I suspect that John meant it the same way people might use it today. It implies a sneakiness, a danger that can strike unexpectedly.

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John's wider point is that faithfulness should not be viewed as a one-and-done. Laying claim to the ancestry of Sarah and Abraham is nothing special: lots of people can do that. Being 'God's People' through the ancient covenant speaks about God's commitment to us. It says nothing about how faithful we are being to that covenant.

John is preaching that our faithfulness is not limited to a history that none of us control. He says that 'we are trees and that we should bear fruit.'

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*What then should we do?*

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I suspect that a smile crept on to John's face when that question came up. It was exactly where John wanted the conversation to go.

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What does repentance look like?

How can a commitment to righteous living affect you?

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John gave some general examples:

- If you have an extra coat, give it away to someone in need.
- If you have extra food, share it.

Then it appears that he started to give specific examples to people in the crowd:

- Tax collectors, don't demand more from people that you are supposed to collect.
- Soldiers, don't abuse your authority. Don't extort money from people to pad your own pockets.

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As I see it, John's advice for living out one's repentance is... **be generous** (or said another way: refrain from hoarding and selfishness)

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The kind of generosity that is promoting is not even very sacrificial.

John calls on us to share our excess *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise*.

John calls on us to be *satisfied* with what we have (when we have enough).

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Paul shared a similar message with the Christians in Philippii:

- Don't let worry consume you.
- Treat others with gentleness.
- Be thankful.
- Let God's peace take care of you.

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To combine the various metaphors and themes of John the Baptist's Jordan valley sermon in Jeff Foxworthy style:

- If you think you can rely on the reputation of your ancestors and not consider faith today, you might be a viper.
- If you selfishly ignore the needs of your neighbours, you might be a viper.
- If you resist bearing the fruit that should naturally sprout in your life, you might be a viper.
- If you take advantage of others because of some power you hold over them, you might be a viper.
- If you have to use violence or threats to get what you want, you might be a viper.

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Don't be a viper!

Let your snake nature sail away on the wind, like the dried out chaff after harvest. Instead, fill the storage bin on your life with the bounty God has grown within you.

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As John the Baptist prepared the Way for Jesus, he preached that getting one's faith back on track begins with generosity.

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Christmastime is sometimes called *The Season Of Giving*. Giving is how we live out our generosity.

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The less-than-noble side of this time of year is that (too often) it is

- A season of getting.
- A season of excessive giving.

Both of these are not born out of generosity but are signs of selfishness.

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- If our Christmas is dominated by anxiety and expectation for what might be given to us, *we might be a viper*.
- If our Christmas is based on you feeding our ego by out-giving everyone else so that we will be adored by others or just wallow in our own self-satisfaction, *we might be a viper*.

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Fellow vipers - there is good news for us!

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What, then, shall we do?

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On this Sunday of Joy, we can start anew by trusting and rejoicing that God has endowed us with a gentle, trusting, generous soul.

This is built in to our very nature. We just need to set it loose.

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Selfishness is shallow. It is weak and fleeting.

Our generous self is solid and grounding.

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When we release the selfishness, it will blow away, and our generosity will remain. And we will know inner and outer peace.

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**Rejoice in the Lord always.  
Let your gentleness show.  
And the surpassing peace of God  
will guard your hearts and your minds  
in Christ Jesus.**

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Let us pray:

Holy God, source of joy, in Jesus, you inserted your presence into the life of the world and we are

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grateful. As we turn to you, we will understand that we are never alone!  
Amen.

#59VU “Joy to the World”