

In old western movies, you can always tell who the good guys and the bad guys are by the color of their cowboy hats. The good guys wear white hats, while the bad guys, of course, wear black ones. Nobody in St. Matthew's story is wearing hats (at least, not that we know of), but it's still just as easy to tell who the bad guys are: they're the ones who wear the titles "Pharisee" and "Sadducee."

It's kind of ironic, actually, because Pharisees and Sadducees really didn't much like one another. The Sadducees represented the powerful elites, the religious establishment centered in Jerusalem. Many priests were Sadducees. Pharisees, on the other hand, were mostly everyday folks. They represented almost a kind of revivalist or pietist movement in Judaism dedicated to applying the law to their whole lives. Pharisees and Sadducees were on opposite ends of the political, theological, and socio-economic spectra. How odd, then, for them to find themselves all wearing the same color hats in Matthew's story.

That's what Matthew is doing here, right at the beginning of his story. When members of these two parties show up among the crowds to be baptized by John, Matthew puts them in black hats for us, calling them a "brood of vipers." It's an epithet that even we modern readers can understand, even if the cultural weight of the slur is somewhat lost. Vipers are dangerous, predatory, stealthy. With very little rhetorical effort, Matthew very quickly makes us grin at the thought of these Pharisees and Sadducees getting the business end of that ax John is talking about.

Matthew doesn't have to work hard at this because we are always on the lookout for black hats. Every story needs a villain, some person or force that opposes the protagonist at every turn, something or someone over which the hero triumphs at the end. Here, Matthew simply tells us who to put under the black hats. But here's a question to ponder: Why do we need *anyone* to wear them? Is it because life teaches us that there is always a villain, always some other out there who is a threat to us and our way of life? Or is it the other way around: is our life experience colored by our expectation—our need—for someone to wear the black hat?

Let me explain what I mean. The human brain is very good at categorization. It is an evolutionary advantage to us to very quickly be able to sort things into types, like which kinds of berries are safe to eat and which are poisonous, or what behaviors in others are friendly and which are threatening. When we encounter something new, our brains are then quickly able to sort the new thing as “safe” or “dangerous” based on previous experience and help us respond accordingly.

The category of “enemy” or “villain,” then—the black hat—may be a survival mechanism hard-wired into our brains by evolution to help us keep ourselves and our communities safe. But I wonder: is there always a villain? Or are our brains wired in such a way that we must *always* identify a villain, whether there is one or not? I wonder if we need someone in a black hat in order to feel safe.

It seems counter-intuitive, but think about it: as long as we know who is wearing the black hat, we know where the danger is. Otherwise, we are always wondering if there is some unknown threat sneaking up on us like a snake in the grass. The black hat gives us an issue or an idea or a person on which we can focus our attention. Having a common enemy can even bring us together, just like it did the Pharisees and the Sadducees. If we can just get rid of the black-hat, our problem will be solved: good triumphs over evil, the hero saves the day, everyone lives happily ever after. But what if it isn't that simple?

While John is warning the “brood of vipers” who are in danger of being cut off, Paul describes how God, in Christ, is grafting on. In chapter 11, he describes the Church like an olive tree. God has grafted these Gentile “wild branches” into the cultivated Jewish tree in the orchard. He urges both Jews and Gentiles in today's reading, then, to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed all of them. Such a welcome, he says, is both a symptom of what God is already doing as well as a sign of the greater thing that is still to come: the peaceable kingdom imagined by Isaiah. Jews and Gentiles being brought together into one community is foreshadowing a reality in which even leopards lie down with goats and wolves and sheep bed together.

And so, I begin to wonder: what if the call to repent is an invitation to bring together, rather than cut apart? What if preparing the way of the LORD is better

accomplished by welcoming the black-hats rather than trying to defeat them? We certainly hear that from Jesus in Matthew's gospel. He would have us pray for our enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive seventy times seven. If we look forward to a future where the calf and the lion cub and the fatling all romp together, maybe now is the time to start scheduling some play-dates.

But what happens if we can't do that? What about those situations in which the danger is real? We still live in a world where lions do not yet eat straw; where folks still shoot up LGBT night clubs and burn mosques. The reality is that any kid who attempts to snuggle with a leopard is going to be eaten. Some things are simply beyond our ability to heal—yet.

I notice that the slur John uses for the enemies in his story is “brood of vipers,” which directs my attention to another line in Isaiah's poem: “the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand in the adder's den.” As he imagines the peaceful reign of God, Isaiah is imagining the reversal of an old curse: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

What's particularly striking to me is that this is the curse pronounced not upon the humans who sinned, but upon the serpent—the enemy. In other words, Isaiah's vision includes healing and welcome for the enemy—the black-hat—as a part of God's promise. The original curse was brought about by something the serpent did; but the reversal of that curse will be accomplished by God.

We may not be in a position yet to be able to forgive all hurts or reconcile all relationships, but what we cannot put together, God can—and God will. Those things that we are not capable of fixing, God will fix. That's the promise I hear in this text. In fact, I wonder if—in spite of John's protestations—the “brood of vipers” coming down to the Jordan to be baptized may not be itself a sign of hope that maybe this promise is not too far-fetched after all. If the Pharisees and the Sadducees can come together (even if it is through a mutual desire for power), why not wolves and lambs?

That there is hope in this story even for the serpents makes me believe that there is hope for all of us. I wonder how many of us in reading this story are eyeing that ax lying at the root of the tree with a sense of fear or worry. Being able to point to the black hats helps us convince ourselves that there are other trees to be chopped down before us; but here the message is that even the remaining stumps are capable of sending up new shoots.

Isaiah is waiting for the coming of a righteous king. We wait for someone or something better than a king; we wait for the coming of God who is able to bring life from death and healing from harm. I think the grand question of Advent is this: knowing that this is what lies ahead, what is our place in the world as we wait?

We can continue to follow our biological imperative, sorting the world and the people in it into black hats and white hats, evil and good, but is that really what will serve us best? What happens to us if we begin to imagine a world without hats, a world in which the enmity between the serpent and the nursing child is erased and the offspring of Eve plays over the adder's den? We may not live in that world yet, but it is coming. How are we going to prepare for it? How will we treat the lions and the serpents in the meantime? We know the fruit that brought about the curse, but what are the fruits of repentance?