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Advent III/C

IN VIPERS VERITAS: IN GRAVITAS GRATIA

Just when we were beginning to have some fun, comes John the Baptist like some obstreperous party-crasher. Right in the middle of seasonal gyrations: stifling cuss words as we untangle Christmas tree lights, freezing our fingers off as we string them up on outside, setting up the manger even though the baby Jesus is missing, freaking out over the right gift for someone about whom we have mixed feelings, ... into all this erupts John the Baptist with his deprecations of our good intentions, and brash preaching about the destructive fire of judgment that is to come right soon. Advent serenity is under siege.

Traveling long distances, large crowds come to the Jordan for John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Instead of greeting them warmly, as most guest speakers might do, John assails the crowds with insults.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Where does John get this audacity? He fails social graces 101.

Let's look at the text itself. Both Matthew and Luke describe John's explosive appearance at the Jordan. Both draw material from Mark's gospel. But they also share 200 verses from another source

which scholars call “Q” (quelle = “source”). Rich with many Aramaic phrases, Q is thought by some to be the earliest source.

Today’s gospel comes from Q. Its unsettling focus on judgment and the wrath of God is not an isolated case. In Matthew and Luke there are a number of parables and stories that reiterate this theme. Also in today’s reading, is another very different motif of Luke’s gospel, that of social justice. Many stories in Luke highlight empowering the poor and dignifying outcasts and sinners. So, in today’s gospel, we encounter the God’s wrath as well as God’s compassion, a dualistic pair worth holding in tension.

John wastes no time in getting to the “bad” news. He spares no one. Take the image of the crowd as a brood of vipers. Vipers are poisonous snakes. A brood refers to the young offspring of animals.

The implication in John’s vivid image is that young and dangerous snakes have come out of their dens in the desert to flee the fire of wrath that is coming. The crowds have come because they are scared. But for John, the baptism they have come for is not about flight from God’s wrath to some safe perch. Rather, it is about a conversion that results in moral deeds. He says, “*Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*” His baptism is not about safety, personal piety or “getting right with God” --- with no consequence to behavior. Repentance and conversion mean changing the way one lives.

He goes on, don’t even begin to say to yourselves, “*But we have Abraham as our ancestor.*” Your religious lineage means nothing. It is no big deal. “*God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham.*”

Superficial credentials do not impress John. Don't count on your family name or church denomination. John is not interested in appeals made to tribal legacies, social status, whether you "belong" as a DAR or an SAR, whether you just got off the boat or crossed the border, whether you are a Rotarian, seminarian or millenarian.

At this point, we might want to go quietly back to tidying up the manger on the mantle piece and pretend we have not heard any of this. We probably like a God who does not have anger. Why can't God and Jesus be nice and domesticated the way we like them? Perhaps God has a "shadow" side? Personally, I am more comfortable with the generous and compassionate God of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son than this God of Judgment that John presents. However, I would like to imagine that there is nothing petty about God's wrath, that what outrages God are the many ways we hurt or kill each other and wreak havoc on the creation.

We do not have to choose sweet baby Jesus over John the Baptist's righteous God. What about holding the two in tension? Innocence and guilt? The beauty of birth and the shadows of death? Judgment and grace? Holding the opposites in tension makes a highway for our God and a path for the new creation.

In the next part of today's gospel from Luke we get some good news. To paraphrase, maybe you are in Hell, but there *is* way out. After his tirade, the people in the crowd ask John a good question. "*What then should we do?*" John now helps the people he has just lambasted by instructing them how to live. He is not a preacher who terrifies his audience with fiery images of hell but provides no way out of the blaze. What John says is very simple. "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*" "Simple" does not mean easy. John is talking about sharing. If we have more than enough clothes in our closets, if we have two dozen pairs of shoes, if

we have a full pantry, if we have considerable wealth, or even a little, John says we must share.

In our times, this message is counter-cultural and, if followed, leads to a spiral of downward mobility in a materialistic world. John is preaching social justice and egalitarian ethics. We can probably guess how he would feel about corporate executives who earn hundreds of times the compensation of the lowest paid workers. Capitalism would find no room in John's inn. When John first sees the crowd at the riverbanks he assumes no one is innocent.

But he does give help. Share what you have and do not abuse your power. *"Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'"* Tax collectors usually added an illegal surcharge onto their own collection fees, often in predatory amounts. As agents of Rome, they were feared and reviled. John gives them a chance to save themselves and tells them, *"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."* Living justly is simple hypothetically but not easy. The tax collectors will have to give up some of their power over others and some of their profit. Less profit means less of something else they are accustomed to having. "Less" is not a word they or perhaps we want to hear.

Living in the most affluent society the world has ever known, we are in the bull's eye of John's target. What are we to do? Especially at this time of year when there are pressures to spend money on gifts that will *not* help the child who has no coat, the homeless man with no food, the Sudanese widow in a refugee tent, or the jobless person in Salisbury, Canaan or Millerton.

At our home, the hangers in our closets sag with items of clothing we do not need. This, in spite of our sporadic efforts to let go

and simplify. We do something, however, that is at least a beginning for us. We designate a portion of our Christmas budget to local and overseas outreach. I know many of you do this also. The Episcopal Relief and Development Fund and other non-profits committed to third world development provide many opportunities to make a huge difference in someone else's life. One can purchase a goat, a flock of chickens, a life-saving malaria-proof mosquito net, an irrigation pump, or subsidize a micro-finance loan.

When Deborah and I were in Oaxaca, Mexico earlier this year, we visited a rural town (Teotlan) where small micro-finance loans ("Investours") are changing lives, providing income, empowerment and hope. One woman cheerfully showed us a homemade, tin chicken-coop in which she had begun to raise a dozen chicks to sell in 6 months or so. When she pays back the money used to buy the chicks, she will be eligible for a larger loan.

When we move from acquisition to relinquishment and sharing, the ornery strings of Christmas lights can be untangled, the wonderful scent of the tree on one's hands and in the air is a balm for the soul and the baby Jesus will come whether or not the missing manger piece is found.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even 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." ¹⁰And the

crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.