
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

You Brood of Vipers

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Theodore Elsenheimer

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18

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Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-264-1221 • info@beatitudeschurch.org
www.beatitudeschurch.org

🎵 God is still speaking,

“Okay, so what the heck is this guy doing here? Isn't this the season designed for good babies (“no crying he makes”), gentle cattle, tidy sheep and angels. Oh my, lots & lots of angels?”

Well, yes and no. Yes, those are essential parts of the story. But no, the story isn't only about babies, livestock, and angels. It's about us, life. We are. Life is sometimes good, gentle and tidy. But life is clearly not always angelic. Amidst the glitter of tinsel and the glow of holiday candles comes the booming voice of John the Baptizer calling for repentance. He appeared on the scene before Jesus to prepare the way, to get people to re-envision what the coming of the Promised One was to mean, urging us to begin making different choices for our living.

John doesn't appear as a cuddly Christmas character, but he is a big part of the story.[1]

Sometimes when we hear these verses of the story about John the Baptist the words. “You brood of vipers!” resonates in our hearts and minds, revealing images of who those vipers truly are. Sometimes we put our own faces into that lineup. At other times we may clearly see a particular person we have come to know or a host of people, that “Brood of Vipers”. Those very words define a boundary between or separate out the good from the bad, us from them, the right from the wrong. You brood of vipers.

From the earliest days we learn that there are good things to do and bad things that are done. You are good when you eat all your vegetables and bad when you hit your sister. These life lessons develop a core of values and morals that guide us in our lives. Yet at times the lines drawn cut us off from ourselves and others.

As valuable as these life lessons are and as imperative as these developmental stages become, these life lessons also do come into conflict, and choices are made. You brood of vipers brings forward the awareness that we have to take stock of how we are living. Forgive me, but it is a bit like spring cleaning. Stuff that once brought life can wear out or collect dust or just loses its value. Such as you need to work hard, until something awakens you to the fact that you are not spending enough time with your family.

John the Baptist spoke to clearly the human community. He dropped the shock bomb on them. These were probably pretty nice, hard working, people who needed a wake-up call. They were in a tough time. They were living in a country ruled by a foreign power. Taxes were high. Other faiths were challenging their traditional values. Their cultural values were therefore changing, and he was reminding them of the founding purpose of why they were living and what the cornerstone of their lives was. John asks them to repent, to reflect on their lives and prepare for the one coming that would bring hope and promise for their lives.

But how do we do that? What is required of us? When John is speaking the words “You Brood of Vipers” he slapping them, us. Trying to wake them up, get them ready.

John, in fact, was asking them to look at their lives and remember what the purpose of life is. He is a Hebrew prophet, reminding the people that we have a purpose, and it is more than getting all you can for yourself. For one instance we can remember the answer given in Micah 6:8:

“But God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.”[2]

John is preparing them for change. They know they have to change. And of course they probably didn't want to hear that. It is simply part of being human to get caught up in just doing the next thing, becoming locked into what works, becoming afraid when change is called for. It is so much easier to just go with the flow.

How many conversations have you heard recently that begin, "So, what do you still have to do to get ready for Christmas?" In response, people tick off the items on their to-do list, which is usually centered on baking sweets, mailing Christmas cards, and buying presents.

Amidst the glitter of tinsel and the glow of holiday candles comes the booming voice of John the Baptizer calling for repentance. This strong message has within it the reminder being an advocate for justice. At first it may seem shocking to some who are wrapped up in the joy of gift giving, celebrative parties, and the merriment of the season. But today's gospel reading reminds us that part of our preparation is to wake up and remember there is more to life than exhaustive shopping, parties, self indulgent behavior. We are called to break down the separations, divisions, barriers to love, to take action in breaking down the imbalance of power and wealth in our world and ask again and again, "What should we do?" and do it.

I ask you today and in the days ahead to allow the words of John the Baptizer to expand its meaning from personal morality to bearing the fruit of justice as you rejoice in the ways you already do good deeds and continue to prepare the ground for the seeds of new life to take root and bring forth joy for your neighbors, friends and family.

We are the best people God could create. I thank God for our relationships, bringing us all new life. That is Good News. Amen.

[1] Adapted from a church Newsletter. Written by, Rev. Susan Leo

[2] The Message, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Micah%206&version=MSG>