

In this sermon I make several references to Jewish people and the practice of Judaism. I do this for the purpose of giving context to the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3. Christians need to remember several things when discussing Judaism and Jewish people:

1. Both John the Baptist and Jesus were Jewish by birth and by religious practice. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus claim to be starting a new religion.
2. The practice of Judaism in 1st century Judea and Galilee was different than the practice of Judaism in the United States today.
3. Christians should be wary of any theology that claims Christians have replaced Jews as the chosen people of God. This idea is called supersessionism, and its spread has led to centuries of mistreatment of Jewish people (for example, supersessionist theology provided the ideological foundations for the Holocaust). It is both more responsible and more Biblically justifiable for non-Jewish Christians to see ourselves as a branch of God's family tree, grafted in by our faith in Jesus Christ.

As scholar Willie James Jennings writes about John's sermon in Luke 3, "These words shake the foundations of family, lineage, kinship, and privilege, as John makes clear that only the fruits of repentance will designate Abraham's authentic children. Such words are aimed at rededication, not at divorce or making distinctions among the elect people of God... John brings us inside the family business, with words harsh and strong, spoken between those who know each other deeply and may demand commitment just as deeply. The church has often handled these words poorly, imagining a freedom to scold [others] as if we are John. We are not. We may stand with [God's people] Israel and overhear this demand to repent and realize that divine love and grace are not exclusive but inclusive of all who would hear and ask the crucial question, 'What then shall we do?'" (*Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol. 1*; Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

“Joy is Our Strength,” by Ellen Williams Hensle, 12/15/24

Well, as I said earlier, the theme for the third week of Advent is joy – how are we going to wring some joy out of John the Baptist calling the assembled crowd a brood of vipers? It's a nasty image. Apparently in the ancient world people thought that venomous baby vipers began their lives by eating their way out of their mother's body, killing her in the process. Not a very nice thing to call the people who have schlepped all the way out to the wilderness to hear you preach. As one commentator I read this week put it, “No one wants to be chastised by John the Baptist this close to Christmas.”

Now the Zephaniah passage Barbara read for us, that's a text of joy. God delighting in the people, renewing them with divine love, even exulting over them with loud singing as on a day of festival. Have you ever imagined God singing to you, like a parent making up silly songs to sing to a child on their birthday, just for the pure joy of it? That's how God feels about us, according to Zephaniah. But according to John, if we don't shape up, God is ready to throw us into the unquenchable fire. Hm.

I do think we can find some joy here, I really do. And certainly the people who heard John's message received it as Good News. John's name-calling tactics may not be what we would consider polite evangelism today, but they did work.

John took seriously the role God assigned to him even before he was born, the job of preparing God's people for the coming of Jesus the Christ. And John understands Jesus's coming as a kind of judgment. The ax is at the root of the tree, he says, ready to cut down anything that does not bear good fruit. Later he describes Jesus as coming to separate the wheat and the chaff, collecting the good grain and burning what is leftover. John wants the people to know that judgment is coming. And he wants them to respond to this announcement of judgment not with fear, but with repentance – to respond with the rededication of their lives to God's purposes and God's people.

And that's just what the people who heard John did. Take the tax collectors. In John's day, tax collectors were considered traitors. They were John's fellow Jews who had gone to work for the occupying Roman government; worse, they were known for collecting more than they were authorized to, for the purpose of lining their own pockets. People hated them. But they hear John's call to repentance and respond by asking what they should do, how they should change. John's answer is simple but potentially life-altering: collect no more than what is prescribed for you.

And the soldiers who came. They were also local Jews working for Rome, probably in service to Herod, the Roman governor of Galilee, the region John and his cousin Jesus hailed from. Soldiers were nobody's favorite folks either, as they had likewise gone to work for the empire, and were known for extortionary practices. But the soldiers, too, hear John's message and ask, "what then should we do?" John tells them not to cheat the populace out of their money by threats or false accusations, and to be content with their pay. Again, John's instructions are simple and clear, though they may have required a serious change in lifestyle to carry out. But the soldiers and the tax collectors, they stand ready to make the change.

While the threat of judgment may not be joyful, the work of repentance definitely can be a joy. Repentance – humbly admitting our brokenness and turning toward God for direction; reorienting our lives so that at the center of all that we do is God's love for us and our love for all that God has made. John tells us that bearing fruit worthy of repentance is pretty straightforward: if you have more than you need, share it. Care for your neighbors with honesty and respect. Consider the poor; don't use the advantages of your position to enrich yourself at the expense of those around you. Treat others as the beloved children of God that they are.

As one person in this week's Wednesday Bible study reflected, there is so much joy in sharing what you have. I certainly felt joy as I helped Beth Vaccaro take a vanload of presents to ACHIEVEability earlier this week. Along with the preschool, you all stepped up to provide Christmas gifts for more than 60 children in West Philadelphia who might not otherwise get a whole lot for the holidays. It was pretty comical, actually, how Beth and I and the ACHIEVEability team had to keep coming back down the elevator to her van with yet another cart – stuff kept coming out of the trunk and side door of the van, like a clown car or Mary Poppins' carpet bag. By the time we finally had everything out of there we were all laughing and sweating under our coats. Sharing what we have with those who could use a little extra: a simple, joyful fruit of repentance.

And there is joy, too, in the community that is created when we all opt into a life marked by repentance. Once again, John says it in a way that to our modern ears sounds more judgmental than joyful; but when we listen, we hear Good News.

John warns the crowd: Do not even 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." As you likely know, Judaism is primarily a religion of inheritance – you become a Jew by being born into a Jewish family. John's Jewish audience saw themselves as children of Abraham, connected by blood to that ancient patriarch whose offspring God promised to make into a great nation, all the way back in the first book of the Bible. John and the people he was preaching to understood themselves as part of God's family by virtue of their bloodline.

But John warns them not to comfort themselves with their ancestry. God can turn anyone or anything into God's family, John claims: from stones in the wilderness God can raise up children to Abraham. Our English translation doesn't carry the play on words that John is making here – the word for stones rhymes with the word for children in John's native Aramaic. His cleverness may not carry but his point stands: God wants the people not just to *believe* they belong in God's family, but to *behave* like it, to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

This makes room for a whole new branch of God's family tree, made up of anyone who hears the Good News of God's redeeming love and responds by asking "What then shall we do?" Anyone who wants to be in can be in. All we have to do is humbly admit our brokenness and turn toward God for direction, orienting our lives around God's abundant love and grace toward all people, and striving to live out that love together.

That's just what we did a few minutes ago when we baptized Geordie – we welcomed him into our family of faith. We admitted our brokenness and our need for God to work in our lives to make us whole. Then we promised to teach Geordie about God's love. And not only that, we promised to do the work of loving him in a way that reflects God's love. Not just to *believe* he belongs in God's

family, but to *behave* like it. Geordie's in – and now we have promises to keep. You know what? On this “everybody gets chastised by John the Baptist” Sunday, I can't think of much that's more joyful than that.

So together let us bear the worthy fruit of repentance that John teaches us about. If you have more than you need, share it. Care for your neighbors with honesty and respect. Consider the poor; don't use the advantages of your position to enrich yourself at the expense of those around you. Treat others as the beloved children of God that they are. And remember that you, too, are a beloved child of God, part of God's chosen family. Simple instructions, but potentially life-altering – and definitely joy-producing.