

“May God defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy, and
crush the oppressor.” AMEN!

Imagine going to your mailbox and
finding a plain envelope inside.

Nothing fancy, it's not red, green or gold and
could even be an advertisement,
but you're not sure.

It could be a card from a friend.

You open it and find that
it is indeed a photo card.

The kind we get during the Christmas season,
but this one is not with a family and
there's not manger scene.

Instead, the picture is of a burly figure
with a grim look on his face.

You didn't know what the card was
until you opened it, but now
the message is inescapable.

Below the picture are these words,

“Welcome to Advent! You brood of vipers!”

Sincerely, John the Baptist. (Pause)

Matthew’s gospel always brings
the baptizer’s message in Advent reminding
us that amidst the displays of

Christmas lights and pine tree scents,
around the cookies and parties,
the carols and bells,

we ought not be distracted
by our privilege and power.

John’s words aren’t pretty.

In fact, nothing about him is pretty.

Camel hair clothing and a honey dipped locusts diet.

He probably had a smell that went along with his sight.

He demanded attention, but the kind of attention
we might not expect.

Instead of people fleeing from him or
being disgusted by him,
they came to him.

He was incredibly popular,
not because of his looks,
but because of his message.

You see, there was a mass of people
who connected to what John preached.

A message that God is about to intrude into
the world in ways the religious authorities
did not expect.

John's harsh "viper" criticism was
for the religious leaders to learn
God was up to something new.

Something that was going to happen
outside of the temple, out of their control,
but would change the world.

His message of repentance was for
the entire listening crowd, and for us,
but his "brood of vipers" statement was
for the religious leaders...

like the high priest, the Sadducees, and me.

Anyone who proclaims that God only
comes through the institution,

according to John the Baptist, is a viper.

As a pastor, I hear John's message loud and clear,
God does what God does with or without religion.

Yet, I also know that new and good things
come through organized religion, too.

Through the church, the mosques,
the synagogues, and other peaceful
places of worship these new and
good things come into the world.

Knowing this, we also know that these
good things become diminished
when leaders believe they're perfect and
it's everyone else's responsibility
to repent. (Pause)

When I think of the ways I must repent,
I squirm, don't you?

I begin to think that a list of "do's" and "don't's"
would be helpful.

But a funny thing happens when we begin
to focus on a list of behaviors.

We list weaknesses and bad habits, but

rarely list things like arrogance, complacency,
greed, or abuses of power.

When we neglect to recognize the ways
we cling to those things, the call
to repentance is not possible. (Pause)

There are places in the Bible where sins get listed,
but the baptizer never makes a list of sins,
instead he invited people into
the presence of God.

John didn't talk about God gently
knocking on the door, like in that famous
Sunday School room portrait of Jesus
gently knocking. :-)

No, his version was that God was about to blow
the door to the world off it's hinges and
be everywhere for everyone.

When religious leaders wag their fingers and
point at bad behavior, preachers like
John the Baptist point to God.

His message about the One who is coming
was that this One will baptize you in
the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Pause)

Fire is mentioned in this section of Matthew
in connection with the Holy Spirit and
it's mentioned in connection to chaff at
the end.

The wheat is gathered and the chaff is
burned with unquenchable fire.

God fire is painful.

It's judgment language that, too often, is
carelessly thrown around by irresponsible
religious leaders.

The incredibly popular John the Baptist used
the image of this "Other One" who's coming
with winnowing fork in hand.

We immediately think of good people being
separated from bad people.

Thoughtless religious leaders weaponize
this interpretation to note who's in and who's out,
playing like they are God.

Usually appealing to everyone around them
(the greedy and powerful) who are smug enough
to believe they have the "in" guarantee.

While we might conclude that John's words
here revealed he didn't fully comprehend just
what this "Other One" was about to do,

we can also look deeper into the images of
wheat and chaff to see that wheat and chaff
are parts of the same cereal plant.

So instead of dividing people, this interpretation
leads us to see that we are the cereal plant,
you and I.

This Jesus, the One who is coming, will keep
the valuable (precious, unique) you and me.

The parts that make Tom, Tom, and
the parts that make _____, _____, and
the parts that make _____, _____ will be kept.

Call it the soul, the self, or the inner spirit.

That's kept safe and secure while the dry, scaly,
husk gets tossed, burned or blown away.

That's the good news of this text.

It might seem as hard to believe as
a lion eating straw or the wolf living with the lamb,

but that's exactly who Jesus is to us and
what Jesus will do for the world.

AMEN!

Today, we hear our stewardship message from Rudy
Hehn. Let's welcome him to the microphone.