

December 6, 2009  
Second Sunday in Advent

“Live Your Baptism”

Text: Luke 3:1-14

“*You brood of vipers!*” Wow. I’ve heard of some innovative and different ways to kick off a worship service, but that’s not one of them. Yet as Luke records the beginning of John’s ministry, that is John’s invocation. “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*”

This language may not surprise us at first. In Matthew’s Gospel we have Jesus saying the same thing. But we’re used to it being said to those guys who really deserve it, the nasty scribes, Pharisees and Jewish leaders who are out to get Jesus; the folks who reject and want to kill Him.

But look at who John is yelling at. “*He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers!’*” These aren’t people who are rejecting John’s message. These are the people who have been drawn to John’s proclamation that the Messiah is coming. These are people coming in faith. These are people who have come to receive John’s “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*”

So why does John blast them like this? Probably because they need it. He kind of hearkens to their past behavior and that of their ancestors who had lived under the promise of God to be made a great nation and prosper if they would only remain faithful to Him. “*Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.*”

The Jews had this thinking that simply because they were Jewish, they had an “in” with Yahweh and really didn’t need anything more. They were good Jews, by no means an evil brood of vipers. But John says being a Jew is just like being a stone, it means nothing. Trusting in one’s Jewishness under Abraham is no better than being a Gentile, a worthless stone.

I think John’s words about Abraham have a twofold effect. First, the people who trust in being sons of Abraham and don’t think they need John’s baptism or the Messiah to which it points will turn away at this insult. They are self-righteous in their ancestry and their hollow practice of doing the written law.

Second, John’s words convict those who realize they are this evil and sinful brood of vipers. These people realize that they have a real need to receive this baptism and the forgiveness of sins therein. They realize the urgency in John’s words is meant for them. “*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*”

And please note that even though John calls them this “brood of vipers,” he doesn’t curse them and send them away. What does he do? He baptizes. He washes away their sins because they come to him with faith in his proclamation of the coming Messiah. In short he does Law and Gospel. Those who refuse the message of Messiah receive no forgiveness and comfort. Those who admit their sin and receive the proclamation of the coming Christ receive the comfort of forgiveness of sins.

But the people also know that the baptism of repentance unto forgiveness and this proclamation of Messiah calls them to action. “*What then shall we do?*” they ask. John’s

answer is to share your blessing with those in need, be fair in what you do, treat others justly, be content with your blessings.

John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, and to repent means to turn; to change direction. John is calling on people to change from valuing themselves above others because they are righteous children of Abraham to loving others above themselves because God has changed them from sinful and evil vipers to His beloved children. They are to change direction and do the same thing God has called mankind to do from the beginning; Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. The baptized are called to reflect the perfect love God has shown to them.

The immensity of God's love would shortly be revealed in the Messiah Jesus Christ. God's love is so great that His son would soon suffer and die to pay for the forgiveness these people are receiving. John's baptism of repentance prepares people for the coming of Christ. The baptism to come later will link believers into the Christ's death to sin and resurrection to life everlasting.

You and I have that baptism. We have been washed of sin, washed by the torrent of His love and mercy right out of the grip of Satan and into God's kingdom. God has changed us from sons and daughters of darkness into sons and daughters of light. It's a fact. God has changed us. As Paul writes, God has begun a good work in you.

*"What then shall we do?"* should be our question also, each and every day, several times a day. Why? Because in our sin we have this awful tendency to begin treating our baptism as if it were like being a descendant of Abraham—that is somehow gives us this lock on God's favor and we can just go along doing as we please—and as we please means putting ourselves at the center of things. It means loving ourselves above others and especially means loving ourselves above God.

John spoke of the arrival of Jesus to sacrifice Himself for us on the cross, but His words ring true for us also; *"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

Jesus is coming. We in three weeks celebrate His past coming as a baby in a manger. But we today and every day expect His next coming in glory and judgment. He can find us one of two ways. He can find us pointing back to our baptism saying, "That thing you did with the water way back when, that did something right?" speaking of it as a gift long forgotten. Or He will find us living our baptism in faith and repentance, joyfully receiving His loving forgiveness and asking ourselves how we can reflect God's abundant love toward us.

Value your baptism. Value the work God has begun in you. Live it. Live it by repenting, turning from your sins daily to have them washed away in Christ's blood on the cross. Live it by striving to live out the love of God reflected in your heart, soul, words and actions both back to Him and to those around you. Live it by doing all you can to be what Christ has made you—a righteous child of God.

Brood of vipers or poor miserable sinners? It's all the same and at one time we were both. But Christ through baptism and the faith surrounding it began in you a work of perfection. Look to His sacrificial gift of love daily and react with a turning; a turning from sin, a turning toward love of God and neighbor, a turning toward forgiveness, a turning in expectant anticipation toward the imminent arrival of our savior to complete the perfection of us, His beloved.

Amen