

“Grumpy or Graceful” – Luke 3:7-18 – Advent 3 – Dec 16/12

“You brood of vipers!” Wow! What a way to start off a meditation on scripture. For that matter, what a way to start off a section of scripture. Especially when that piece of scripture is matched with others that start off with “with joy you will draw waters from the well of salvation” (Isa), “rejoice and exult with all your heart” (Zeph), and “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil). Why the discrepancy? Why the jarring difference in the gospel reading from the others? Stick with me for a bit, and perhaps you’ll be able to agree with me that the differences between the reading from the gospel according to Luke and the other readings are not so great after all.

The reading from Luke of course continues the look at John the Baptist during Advent. To understand why scripture and the church focuses on John the Baptist during this time of preparation before Christmas it helps to remember that John the Baptist was immensely popular. Make no mistake, he had huge crowds of devoted followers, larger crowds than Jesus some would say. His reputation spread far and wide throughout that end of the Mediterranean basin, no doubt in part helped by his strangely harsh appearance and manner. People notice and pay attention to and remember weird and strangely different individuals. If you disagree, simply think of some entertainers who have received fame and fortune from being strangely different – say, Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger, Meatloaf – not that I’m lumping them in the same category as John the Baptist, but you know what I mean. Any prophet who dressed in wild skins, ate weird food, and grumped at his followers was remembered, and so was his message remembered!

Yes, John the Baptist was hugely popular, with an immense and devoted following. So immense and so devoted, that the question was on many peoples’ minds – was he the Messiah? It was a question that lingered for a long time, indeed it is a subtle kind of question that lingers in various forms today. There are many today who, in their search for truth, for meaning in life, adopt a stern and forbidding approach that seems so very like John the Baptist’s. While images of harsh and unyielding religious zealots in countries whose names end in ‘stan’ come immediately to mind there are plenty of people disguised even as Presbyterians who are quick to echo John’s “you brood of vipers!” and who take delight in images of Christ dressed like the grim reaper swinging a scythe through the hordes of people who have not expressed their faith with sufficient enthusiasm or zeal.

Yes, John the Baptist had huge followings, and many asked, “are you the Messiah?” Luke felt particularly compelled to answer that question, and he affirmed that John was not the Messiah, or Christ, primarily because Jesus was. Luke carefully quotes John as pointing to one who would come shortly as being the real Christ, one who even John recognized and affirmed as being so much greater than himself that he was unworthy even to tie his sandals.

We even hear John draw a distinction between the baptism he expected his followers to receive, and the baptism that the coming Messiah would offer. “I baptize with water”, John proclaimed, invoking images not only of an outward cleansing the body to accompany the inward cleansing of repentance, but also of near-death experiences, being shoved under the water. “But the one coming will baptize with Spirit and fire”, and he continued to expand with a picture of the Messiah as grim reaper, keeping the wheat but burning the chaff. Good grief! Why would anyone, let alone the church in this “very merry” season, want to hear such dreadful stories? And perhaps even more strange was Luke’s declaration that John, “with many other exhortations, [he] proclaimed the good news to the people.” How on earth could Luke finish, right after such a chilling message, with the affirmation that this was “good news”?!

Well, Luke saw it as good news because he was focussed not on the chaff but on the wheat. That's at the heart of this story. It's not so much worrying about the chaff, as it is about being the wheat. We love to move so quickly to the negative, to worry about being the chaff, hoping it's someone else headed for the fire that heated the ovens, if only briefly. But the urging from John was really to concentrate on being the wheat, bringing life and sustenance to others. Indeed, with our modern understandings of the health benefits of including the bran (the chaff) with the kernels, i.e. "whole grain" wheat, we might even be moved to be much more inclusive, as Jesus was of people.

And if we go back and look at the essence of John the Baptist's message with this more positive focus, we discover – perhaps to our surprise – that his message was in many ways not so different from the other messages in scripture, and not so different either from the message that Jesus proclaimed. We hear three different groups of people respond positively to John, and ask him, "what then shall we do?", and his answers to all three have a common theme. (Remember also that three witnesses were enough to convict.) **To the crowds** John says, "share what you have with those less fortunate", which is remarkably similar to Jesus' commands to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick". **To the tax collectors** John says, "collect only what you are legally entitled to collect", echoing God's call for justice. **To the soldiers** John instructs, "do not extort by force, do not be greedy", which rings in parallel with Jesus' command to treat each other with respect and kindness. Not only do these instructions parallel instructions from Jesus, they all share the same motive of compassion. Sharing clothing, not stealing, not extorting, all three echo the familiar message of "love one another as I have loved you" don't they? When we stop to actually hear all of what John had to say we may be surprised to realize that this crusty prophet actually proclaimed a message instructing people to let their hearts motivate their actions, to respond to God with justice and mercy and kindness. Little wonder many people wondered if he was the Messiah.

We know John the Baptist was not the Messiah, but in his role of proclaiming the coming of Jesus, the true Messiah, who would become the risen Christ, John proclaimed a message that was totally consistent, a message of placing care and concern for the poor, the powerless into one's heart. That message is still relevant today, and is especially so as we celebrate the action of God in coming to us in the form of a helpless, powerless infant born in stable, and laid in a manger, surrounded not by burning chaff but sweet-smelling hay. John wanted the people to know – John would want us to know – that the occasion of the arrival of the Messiah is a serious business, not to be taken lightly, and that we should take some time to reflect on what it means and how we should greet the Messiah, and indeed, each other. We are faced with the choice whether we will live out those greetings in the usual way that people think of John; i.e. grumpily, or in the way that both John and Jesus alike called us to do so; namely gracefully, with love and compassion.

This is that time – this is Advent, now is the time to recall that God began the process of sealing his covenant with people in all the tenderness and love that is associated with a newly-born baby. Now is the moment to let our hearts be refilled with all the joy that comes from Emmanuel, God with us. This is the season and the time of year, matched only by Easter, to let our hearts overflow with all the love, joy and compassion that we receive from God's Holy Spirit. Now is the time to know in our hearts that we are loved by God, so clearly demonstrated by the birth of his son, Jesus, who in dying and rising again would show He was and continues to be, the true Messiah, the Christ.