

## **BROOD OF VIPERS**

Ash Wednesday Reflection

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The Gospels tell us that large numbers of people made the trip to the wilderness along the Jordan, where John was preaching, to be baptized by him. We know the story so well that we take it as a given. I think it is worth pausing, however, to ask why. Why did the people go out to John?

Honestly, it is easier to think of reasons that they would not have gone. For one, it was not convenient. He was in the wilderness, not the center of some town or city. There were no roads, taxis, buses, or trains going there. They would have to walk, in some cases, great distances. He was also a little strange. He wore scratchy, camel-hair shirts for clothes and he ate bugs for food. He was a bit of a wild man, maybe even a little scary. Then there is the fact that he was rude. When the crowd did come out, he called them a brood of vipers. Thank heavens he didn't have access to Twitter. One could only guess what he might have tweeted.

Even John seemed surprised that they came. When they arrived he said, "You brood of vipers," and then asked, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Now, in our reading from Matthew tonight, this is addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but in Luke, it is addressed to all who came. It is as if he were asking, why have you come?

He wondered because he was preaching repentance and was fearful that they were complacent, and that they felt no need to repent so as to be right in the eyes of the coming judge. In this case, their complacency was related to their heritage. They were descendants of Abraham, making them part of the Covenant people. To some this was a get-out-of-jail-free card. God would not cast them into the eternal fire because they had the proper pedigree. To this John said, "Pththth, I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." If you don't want to agree with me that John was rude, you will at least concede that he was blunt.

So why did the people flock to him? Who knows another person's motivation, but we can speculate. First, without John saying it, they had to suspect on their own that ancestry was not enough. Over the decades I have had numerous conversations with persons who have been estranged from God but were interested in renewing the relationship. Without my asking for or wanting them, often those conversations began with, what I call, coattail justifications. "My mother was very devout or my brother and

his family go to church all of the time or my grandfather was a minister or my great-grandmother gave money for this church to be built.” The point of this was to convince me or maybe to convince God, but mostly to convince themselves that they were worthy of a relationship, and that God should give them special consideration. Deep down, though, they knew that heritage didn’t cut it, which was actually a good thing because then we could talk about grace instead of reward.

In the same way, the people with John had to know that being descendants of Abraham alone was not going to cut it and that they were living in ways removed from the ways of God, so feared that on judgment day they would not be acquitted. Now here was a man who, for all of his idiosyncrasies, seemed filled with the Spirit of God, and in blunt, direct, no uncertain terms was saying that judgment day was getting close so they better repent, which means change their ways, and prepare for it. If that was a slap in the face, it was not meant to be. It was meant to be a wake-up call.

Biblical scholar M. Eugene Boring described John as “a ‘call to worship’ in the flesh – not a benign and cheery ‘good morning,’ but a real call to worship that shakes the cobwebs off the pews: repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” I love that image: John as a “call to worship” in the flesh. He was blowing the shofar. He was sounding the alarm bells. His message was not just timely, it was urgent. The kingdom did not belong to the genetically correct. It belonged to those who made a decision and acted. So they came, and repented, and waded into the river, and were baptized.

It is the same call to worship issued by the prophet Joel hundreds of years earlier. In Joel’s time an unprecedented plague of locusts had devastated the land. Joel interpreted this as a sign of impending judgment. He called for repentance. “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near....”

Ash Wednesday is Joel saying blow the trumpet and John saying you brood of vipers. It is the wakeup call that the day of the Lord is coming, nearer now than when we first believed. What is at stake is not life or death. What is at stake is eternal life or eternal death. These are the facts. We are mortal. Regardless of our genes, our health, our healthy habits, the advancements of medicines, an ever rising average life span, regardless of everything, we are going to die. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The mark of ashes carries that very message – you are dust and to dust you shall return. That is a given.

What is up in the air is whether we will stay dead or be raised up to eternal life with God. The answer to that question is not determined by ancestry or past performance. It is determined by decision and action. The decision to truly repent – to

acknowledge our sin, our failure to live up to the ways of God and to seek forgiveness, and our action of, as John puts it, bearing fruit worthy of repentance. This is not to say that we have to accomplish x amount of good works to qualify – it is by God’s grace not our works that we are saved. It is to say, however, that, if we confess our sin, but then make no effort to live any differently, then we have not truly repented. We have just checked a box: now I have confessed, God has to raise me up. No! Repentance means change.

I read this week about a number of churches that are providing for what I call drive-by ashes. They are stationing themselves on street corners so people walking or driving by can receive the mark of ashes. There is much I like about that. This is getting out of the church walls and engaging people in the community where they are, something I feel strongly about. Yet, in this instance, I’m like, really? Get your ashes and drive on? Required ritual met. Check. If ever there is a time, this feels like the time that we should be at the altar, on our knees, crying, begging, pleading, promising. The ashes should feel heavy and ugly. The fear palpable. The starkness of our condition evident. We should feel like a brood of vipers and desperately not want to be.

In a while, we will take the bread and cup and hear words of grace, forgiveness, and acceptance. This is how it should be. But first, hear, really hear, the words of John. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The call to worship has been sounded. Have mercy on us, O God.

Amen.