

You've gotta love a passage of scripture that begins with being called a Brood of Vipers and continues with quotes about burning with unquenchable fire—then concludes by saying, *“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”*

This is quite a rant on the part of John the Baptist. Makes me wonder what provoked him into calling the people a brood of vipers? I think we may have a hint in the text:

“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not 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.”

I love it when John gets snarky.

So let's reconstruct: sounds like John was telling them about the wrath to come if they didn't repent, and someone pulled the “son of Abraham” card. You know—the “I don't have to worry, because I'm from the people of Israel, we are the descendants of Abraham—you know—God's chosen people.”

Or --let's put it in words that might be a little more familiar to us: “I don't have to worry about any wrath to come—after all—I am a Christian! I've got that base covered.”

And what was John's response to their assertion? And what might John have said to us?

“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘But I am a Christian’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up Christians! 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. Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

Repentance. I love preaching on repentance. I've done it several times, and I get to do it again! Repentance does not mean feeling really really sorry for something and begging forgiveness: it literally means to see something from a different perspective. To finally understand something – something which utterly changes us—from the inside out.

I once had a very thoughtful, but somewhat skeptical parishioner push me on this definition. He said, “But Rev. Lisa, there are a lot of people that would argue with your definition of repentance. They think it means to feel sorry for something we have done and to ask forgiveness. ”

It is certainly easier to feel sorry for something and ask for forgiveness than it is to have one’s life re-ordered and transformed. It is certainly easier to feel sorry for something we have done in that moment, and then continue to do it again—than it is to be so changed by what we see and hear that it means our entire perspective on things must be changed!

And the sign of repentance—of a changed perspective: fruits worthy of that change of heart.

Do we really believe that God asks enormous love and respect from us for every person we meet? If we did, what would be the fruits? Will we just continue to say we are Christian, or will we *behave* in a way that manifests this kind of love? Will we hide behind words—or will we risk being broken open by the Holy Spirit? What would that look like? Back to the story.....

The crowd then asks John—what would that breaking open—that re-ordering of our lives look like? And he tells them. Notice that his answer to each of them is very specific. If John were here, and you each asked him what that change of perspective would look like in your life, what would he say to you? Would you ask him? Be careful, prophets are brutally honest.

I think that we are often very reluctant to repent: to have our perspective changed. I know that I dig in and sometimes have to be dragged into new thoughts, new ways of being a loving follower of Christ. I don’t like having to change my perspective. Do any of us? That’s why we need prophets.

I listened to Richard Rohr preach this week, and he talked about a scientist called Thomas Kuhn – who states that science has this same problem—science, according to Kuhn, does not progress linearly, but has periodic revolutions, or transformations of thought. New perspectives.

This will often involve deconstruction of popular understandings. And those moments of deconstruction and reevaluation are uncomfortable.

Rohr then wraps up his sermon by stating that “God will always be bigger than our hearts and minds are ready for.”

That would get an emphatic **yes!** from John the Baptizer. It’s not enough to be complacent and rest on our “children of God” laurels—we are going to need to continually see things from a new perspective. To allow ourselves to be broken open so that God can teach us how his love can shine through us more and more into this beleaguered world.

God’s understanding of love **MUST** be bigger than ours, or we would be God. And that would be bad.

It’s Jesus’ followers that need to lead the way with God’s message of generous love. How do we start? What would that look like to each of us?

Well, what did John say to those who asked?

Share.

Play fair.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Do the next right thing.

And most importantly, love everyone.

“So, John-- with many other exhortations, proclaimed the *good news* to the people.” Amen.