

1) *Rejoice and exalt*, exclaims Zephaniah, the prophet;

*The Lord is in your midst, you shall fear disaster no more.*

*Rejoice in the Lord always*, agrees Paul the apostle; *The Lord is near.*

*Don't worry about anything*, he urges, *God's peace will guard you.*

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*You brood of vipers*, says John the Baptist,

*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*

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We're getting mixed messages this morning, wouldn't you say?

And as for that last one—about slithering venomous snakes—

if we hadn't just heard it proclaimed from Luke's Gospel;

we'd have reason to think we'd been caught up in yet one more tweet storm—

one partisan hiss striking out at another.

Interesting, isn't it—which of these two messages snags greater attention?

Amazing how easily verbal venom can distract us from tidings of comfort and joy!

But there it is—so let's go with the flow.

Let's face up first to John's in-your-face phrases: *brood of vipers*, and *wrath to come*, then try to find our way back to *rejoice in the Lord*—not just now, but **ALWAYS**.

2) Easier said than quickly done, however,

because, what comes down concerning John the Baptist is curious in so many ways:

- For openers, John seems to have far less provocation for his “viper” line than do those who, by tweet, trade insult and invective.

Tweet traders, at least, are responding to moves of perceived political adversaries.

John levels his seeming “snake pit” snark against those who have come to him for help!

- Curiosity #2: John doesn't limit himself to these few choice words about stinging vipers. (He's not constrained, as tweeters are, to messages of 280 characters.)

John proceeds to go on a tear of disparaging images:

- Likening his listeners to moral agents no more worthwhile than stones.
- Characterizing them as fruitless trees under threat of an axe.
- Describing their actions as chaff in the wind.
- Threatening them, not once, but twice, with FIRE—UNQUENCHABLE FIRE.

So good is John at cramming maximal verbal zingers into minimal space,

he could earn big bucks as a consultant to current day adversary-trashing tweeters.

- More curious still, you would think that, besieged by such a verbal barrage, those who had come out to hear him would turn around and go back home—or stand their ground and turn his words back on him:

*Where do you get off, you Mangy Camel Coated Leather Belted Locust Eater?*

*How DARE you presume to tell US what to do?*

But that's just what his listeners DON'T do—They are, Luke says: *Filled with expectation.*

WHAT they do is ask for more: *What SHOULD we then do?*

- This also is curious: John’s urgent, incendiary language notwithstanding, that TO which he exhorts his listeners sounds quite mundane:
  - *If you have food and clothes to share with those in need—just do it.*
  - *If you have a government job akin to an IRS agent—just do it.*  
*Just don’t take advantage of your position at the expense of fellow citizens.*
  - *If you are a law enforcer—local police or Roman soldier—just do it.*  
*Just don’t engage in extortion, exert undue coercion, or get greedy.*

THAT’s all it will take to keep the axe from falling,  
the chaff from burning, the wrath from coming?

Has John been making much ado about not so much?

- And then there’s a final curiosity, the most curious of all—  
Luke’s own conclusion to this story about the Baptist:  
*So, with many other exhortations, says Luke, John proclaimed GOOD NEWS to the people.*  
That can mean only one of two things—EITHER  
that Luke reports the BAD NEWS John preaches, but neglects to mention the GOOD;  
OR—much more likely—that, according to Luke,  
what John preaches in those shrill, stark images, IS, in fact, Good News.  
But IF so, HOW so—where’s the Good News in Unquenchable Fire?  
and how could this “Good News,” be an occasion for Advent REJOICING?

3) Try this on with me as an interpretive lens for making sense of what’s going on:  
What if John the Baptist isn’t locked in a power struggle with those to whom he’s preaching?  
What if he’s actually on their side—caring about them, deeply, passionately?  
What if he knows that, in coming out to hear him,  
these folks aren’t looking for someone who’ll just tell them what they want to hear;  
they are looking for someone to help them find their voices to name  
what they, deep down, know is true, but can’t find the words to say?  
They come out to hear him, drawn by soul hunger, by a burning desire to find their true center.  
So John doesn’t waste their time—doesn’t beat around the bush—he cuts to the chase.  
He honors their sense of internal urgency—their keen awareness that something’s gotta change.  
Fruitless trees, windblown chaff—THEY know THAT—thank God John calls it out!  
Children of Abraham—they were, in fact, cut from the solid rock of God’s covenant promises.  
A covenant mandating mutual respect and mutual support—  
A covenant grounding them in God’s own granite-firm commitment to them.  
So what in the world have they been thinking—trading hostile hisses and venomous strikes—  
poisoning prospects for healthy relationships, killing the prospect of verdant communal growth!  
*Preach it, brother!* you can almost hear them say. *Citizen, Tax Collector, Soldier, what shall we do?*  
So John gives them some very down-to-earth practical suggestions for cleaning up their act.  
Simple strategies of social justice that are intended to reconstitute their communal connection  
with each other, and thus with God.

Their baptism in water is not just a cosmetic face wash.

It is a sign of their own self-cleansing in preparation for and anticipation of God's more thorough cleansing baptism of purifying fire.

*It's coming, says John—Bring it on, they reply. We want to prepare the way of the Lord.*

- 4) Let's pause here just to note the obvious—what John the Baptist is about is NOT aggressive/defensive viper-like tweet-striking; but, rather, the antithesis of that:
- John is NOT simply hurling snarky invective.
  - He's NOT trying to prevail in a power game.
  - He's NOT engaged in the fruitless exercise of smearing opponents with shame.

But John's message is NOT only the antithesis of Derision-Speak; it is the antidote as well.

How so? Because, John's strong words are, at their core, about Advent rejoicing.

Come again? Say WHAT?

John's Good News repentance preaching is fundamentally a trumpet call to REJOICE!

- 5) That curious claim also needs some unpacking—let's give it a try.

JOY is not the same thing as HAPPINESS.

Joy is not consumer satisfaction—*I got just what I wanted for Christmas!*

To put it musically, even if crassly, when we sing *Joy to the Word, the Lord is Come*, we are not singing *Tis the season to be jolly*, punctuated by lots of *FAs and LAs*.

Rather, when we sing *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*,

we sing it alongside, and in harmony with *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis says

that the meaning of JOY has not to do with GIDDY DELIGHT, but with INCONSOLABLE LONGING—

a deep-down awareness of the presence of God's Goodness that is both bearing down on us, but also far beyond our reach—joy is an unrealized ideal for which all nations long.

That is precisely the kind of "rejoicing" to which Zephaniah the prophet and Paul the apostle urge their first listeners, and urge us as well—the eager, earnest, urgent joy of Advent:

*Savior of the nations, come/Virgin's Son, make here thy home!*

The Venomous Derision-Speak that so poisons our environment with endless strike and counterstrike—

that Derision-Speak is ultimately driven by a deep-down sense of desperation:

*If we don't strike first, if we don't strike back, we are dead meat.*

Against that gnawing, all-consuming fear, Zephaniah, Paul, and Luke's John the Baptist, each, in his own frame of reference, offers us the antidote of Advent JOY.

Each, in his own setting, is mired neck-deep in desperate circumstances—

conditions wherein hope seems impossible, redemption completely beyond reach.

Yet each one of them urges: *Rejoice, Regardless! The Lord is near—SO—Go ye out to meet him.*

And so, on this Sunday of Advent Rejoicing, we pray as well:

*Even so come, Lord Jesus—we will do our best to prepare your way.*