

- 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, chimes in Paul the apostle; *The Lord is near.*
Don't worry about anything, Paul urges, *God's peace will guard you.*

You brood of vipers, says John the Baptist,
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Mixed messages today, wouldn't you say?

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

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

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

one partisan hiss striking out at another.

Interesting, isn't it—which of these two messages captures 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) But that's easier said than quickly done,

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 those who tweet insult and invective.
They, at least, are reacting to 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 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.

John is so good at cramming maximal verbal zingers into minimal space,
he could teach today's tweeters a thing or two.

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

How dare you tell us what to do,

you Mangy Camel Coated, Leather Belted, Honey Dripping Locust Chomper?

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, well, mundane:
 - *If you have food and clothes to share with those in need—just do it.*
 - *If you have a revenue collecting job—just do it.*
BUT don't take advantage of your position at your fellow citizens' expense.
 - *If you are a law enforcer, just do it.*
BUT don't engage in extortion, exert undue coercion—don't 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 very much at all?

- And then there's a final curiosity—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 only mean:

- EITHER that Luke reports John's BAD NEWS preaching, but doesn't record the GOOD;
- OR, more likely, that, what John preaches in those shrill, stark images, IS 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 on their side—cares about them, deeply, passionately?

What if he knows that, in coming out to hear him,

these folks aren't looking for someone who'll tell them what they want to hear;

they are looking for someone to help them find their voices to name

what they know is true, but can't find 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 give.

Fruitless trees, windblown chaff—THEY KNOW THAT—thank God John calls it out!

Children of Abraham—they ARE, in fact, cut from the solid rock of God's covenant.

A covenant mandating mutual respect and mutual support for each other.

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 healthy relationships, killing communal growth!

Preach it, brother! you can almost hear them say.

Citizen, Tax Collector, Soldier, what shall we do?

So John gives them practical suggestions for cleaning up their act.

Simple strategies of social justice to reconstitute their connection with each other and with God.

Strategies to defuse the wrath, the conflagration that is always fueled by social alienation.

(Think of Paris in recent days.)

Their baptism in the Jordan river can be no perfunctory surface face wipe.
It must be a sign of their own deep self-cleansing acts in preparation for,
and anticipation of God's more totally cleansing baptism of purifying fire.

It's coming, says John—Let it come, his listeners answer.

We want to, we WILL prepare the way of the Lord.

- 4) Let's pause here to note the obvious—what John the Baptist does
is NOT aggressive/defensive viper-like tweet-striking; it is the very antithesis of that.
- John is NOT hurling snarky invective.
 - He's NOT trying to prevail in a power game.
 - He's NOT smearing opponents with shame.

But John's message is NOT ONLY the antithesis of Derision-Speak; it is the ANTIDOTE to it 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 could also use some unpacking, could it not? Let's give that a try.
JOY is not the same 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 World, 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/Let earth receive her king*.

we sing it in counterpoint with *Come, thou long expected Jesus/Borne to set thy people free*.

From our sins and fears, release us/Let us find our rest in thee.

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

that JOY is not GIDDY DELIGHT, but INCONSOLABLE LONGING—

joy is a profound awareness of God's Goodness that calls to us from beyond our reach.

As the Advent hymn goes on to sing: *Dear desire of every nation/Joy of every longing heart*.

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!

- 6) The Venomous Derision-Speak that poisons our environment with 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 context offers us the antidote of Advent JOY.

Each, respectively, is mired neck-deep in desperate circumstances—

conditions wherein hope seems impossible, redemption beyond imagining.

Yet all of them urge: *Rejoice, Regardless! The Lord is near—Go ye out to meet him.*

So on this Sunday of Advent rejoicing we also pray:

Even so come, Lord Jesus! We want to, we WILL prepare your way.