

### Getting Ready for Grace

What I want to know is, Where does John get off saying all this? Who does he think he is, talking to people like this? How does he think he can get away with speaking so graphically, calling the crowds “a brood of vipers,” “snake bastards”? He’s got no degree, no authority, no position, he’s never been elected to anything. So who made *him* boss that he could tell the people that they aren’t good enough and need to change their ways? And, more to the point, how does he justify killing our Christmas conviviality with all this *judgment*, talk of snakes and axes and unquenchable fire, when what we want to hear is joy and peace and good cheer? That’s what I want to know.

John of course sees no need to justify himself to us. We were not at the forefront of his thoughts. He’s concerned, rather, with those who came out to see him in the wilderness. “When you came out here, what did you expect to hear?” he asks. “What did you think you’d get out of this? Did you think that just by coming here and getting dunked, you could get out of facing the challenges ahead, could escape the wrath to come? Did you think that being baptized is some kind of ‘fire insurance’? Or did you come because ‘everyone else is doing it,’ or because it’s the respectable thing to do, to keep up appearances?”

For John, none of those are good reasons for seeking God. God doesn’t care who their ancestors were, or how many generations their family had been there, or how big the crowds are. “None of that matters,” John says. “What matters is where you are now, what you are doing now, whether you’re ready for the New Thing God is going to do.”

You’ll remember, last Sunday, how John stepped onto the scene in the wilderness with a message for his fellow Jews—God is coming. God, who seemed so far away, is making his way to them because they could not make their way to Him. They may have felt lost and forgotten, wandering in a wilderness, but God was coming to save them.

Well, the people who heard it were understandably thrilled by that news, and they came out in droves to see John for themselves. He must have been like a celebrity to them. And they hungrily gobbled up his words, like starving men. Because, in a way, they were, they were starving *for hope*. And they all got in line by the river to be baptized, thinking that was the ticket to salvation.

But John says, “Not so fast. You think that getting wet is all that’s required? You’ve got to ‘bear fruit worthy of repentance.’ You’ve got to show you’re really in this, that you’re willing to do things God’s way now. Now don’t go claiming you’re good because you’re “God’s Chosen people,” because you’ve got Abraham as your ancestor. You’ve got to prove your pedigree, got to show your ancestry by your actions.”

John’s words to the crowd are demanding. He sees through their pretenses and cuts through their self-justifications. It’s like if John were here today, he’d tell us, “God doesn’t care that you were baptized as a baby seventy years ago, or that you’re parents and grandparents have been church

members all their lives, or that your family's been Episcopalian for five generations. None of that matters. What matters is whether God matters to your life, if you are any different, live any different because of Jesus.

It reminds me of the Amish man who was asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist whether he had been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior? The man replied, "Why do you ask *me* such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask *them* if I've been saved."

The point, John's point, is that it's not enough just to believe, or to say that we believe. Belief has to make a difference in our lives, in how we act, how we treat others. Our deeds are what matters.

Now, that message sounds more like Santa Claus than it does Jesus, doesn't it? We'd better be good little boys and girls if we want Santa—I mean, God—to bring us presents. Only, according to John last week, God isn't checking his list to see if we've been naughty or nice. He's already made the decision to come to us, to save us. We don't have to do anything to earn it. It's grace, undeserved, unmerited grace.

But then today, just a few verses later, John tells us we *do* have to do something, that God's coming *does* require something of us. The way God is coming, the salvation that he's bringing, we're not ready for it, the way we are. If we want to get in on it, we have to change, to repent, to course-correct. And this is more than just feeling sorry. It's about changing our ways, about "bearing fruit," fruit that is worthy, that is in keeping with the nature of the new way of life God is bringing.

That life, John tells the crowd, is marked by sharing rather than clutching, giving rather than taking, living for God's Kingdom of righteousness and peace rather than living for ourselves. It's a wonderful life, John insists, and we best get on with living it, practicing it now. For, if we are to get on board with it, and not be blown over by it when it comes, we need a head start, we've got to get running now.

So here we have a two-fold message from John: God is coming to save us *and* we need to get ready for it, to make ourselves worthy of the kind of world, the kind of life that He's bringing. The first part sounds like good news, but the second, not so much. It sounds more like work, like self-help, like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, like anything but grace.

Then again, it depends on how we understand grace. If we think of grace as a Christmas present, something that God gives us without any strings attached, as we would give someone a sweater or a game we got at Target, then yes, John's message doesn't seem very *graceful*. But what if grace isn't like that, like a Christmas gift? What if it's like a father giving a son a treasured family heirloom—a watch or antique desk—or a mother passing on her wedding dress to her daughter? It's a gift to be sure, but there's an expectation that comes with it, an expectation that they will care for the gift, so that they can in turn pass it on to the next generation. Such a gift is not exactly "free"; it comes with a responsibility. In the German language, this connection is explicit—for every gift (*gabe*), there is a duty (*aufgabe*).

For John, the gift of grace, of God coming to save us, entails a duty, an expectation, an obligation: to become the kind of person who can receive that gift, someone who can accept grace and let it work itself out in our lives. God's grace, you see, is not just some *thing* we get, but an invitation to a new way of living, of living with God. That's how the gift of grace is made complete, how it realizes its end—in a changed life. For God loves us as we are, yes, but he loves us too much to leave us as that way. To be embraced by God is to be transformed by him.

For this to happen, for the gift of grace to do its work in us, we have to let go of our old comforts and securities, the crutches we use to prop us up and excuse our failings. But of course we aren't too keen on doing that most days. Which is why John has to come and kick the stools out from under us, taking an ax to the root of our self-justifications. Our ancestry, our religious pedigrees, our credentials and socially approved lives—they're all, in God's eyes, yard trash, deadwood, waiting to be chopped up and tossed into the fire, so as to clear the land.

That is John's point, I think, and the point of the season of Advent—as harsh, fiery, and judgmental as John's words today are, his purpose is our good. He aims to clear out our hearts, our lives, of the dead stuff so that we can make room for God, to make room not just for the baby Jesus, but to make room for the Lord Almighty to come and make his home with us the rest of the year. For God came to us at Christmas as a baby, but He comes to us throughout our lives as our Savior, God come to save us.

The point of these weeks leading up to Christmas, and Christmas itself, is not comfort or nostalgia or being affirmed for being good just the way we are. It's about help. Help is coming, we hear in our lessons, change is coming—not by our hands, but through a God who “makes all things new.” Including us.

Sometimes, in our best moments, we can admit that we need that, that we need help, because we are not who we ought to be. And for the rest of the time, we have John, who holds up a mirror to us, to show us as we are.

There's an old movie you may have seen, from the 50s, titled, “The High and the Mighty.” It tells the story of a plane that's flying over the ocean when the engine goes out. The pilot's voice announces to the cabin, “There is a problem. We cannot correct it. We are not going to make it. I tell you this so that you might prepare yourselves for the inevitable.” An elegantly dressed woman then begins to remove the diamond broach from her neck and the large ring from her finger. She peels off her false eyelashes, wipes the makeup from her face. A large scar is now visible on her forehead that the makeup had always concealed. She prepares herself for the end. She will go there as she really is. The flight is saved, as it turns out. They make it to the airport. But the woman has changed. Faced with the end of her life, she chose to face it honestly. She took off the mask, and she became who she really was.

John's words do that for us. They show us as we are, as we are apart from our pretensions and excuses. He shows us that we are not as good as we think we are, that we need help. He does this not to judge us but to prepare us, prepare us for our savior, a savior who, with the sharp edge of unrelenting love, will cut away all that is broken and harmful within us—our greed and selfishness, our fear and hate—and leave behind only the best within us so that we might become reflections of grace ourselves.

So who John thinks he is doesn't matter. What matters is who we are, or rather who we are becoming. The coming of Christ at Christmas and throughout our life is a good thing, but not an easy thing. And it's not something we can sit idly, passively by, when it happens. It demands things from us, demands the best of us. This is why we need John. It's why every Advent we have to go through the wilderness in order to get to Bethlehem, why we have to face up to the fire-breathing, ax-wielding prophet before we can welcome the Christ. Christian joy, true joy, comes not as a result of getting all worked up with holiday exuberance, but only by way of the truth. It comes as a gift of being given the grace to honestly see ourselves, of admitting our need for salvation. That we can do that is due in no small part to John, who gets us ready for grace. Thanks be to God!